Defending Earth

The Adventures of Sarah Jane Smith

An Unofficial Charity Collection



Curated By
M.H. Norris

Defending Earth
The Adventures of Sarah Jane Smith

Curated by M.H. Norris

DEFENDING EARTH
An Adventures on Earth Productions charity volume
Curated by M.H. Norris
Cover by Sophie Iles
Design by Adventures on Earth Productions
Illustrations by Sophie Iles
Book design by James Bojaciuk

Doctor Who and the TARDIS are trademark the British Broadcasting Corporation

Permissions
The Brigadier appears by kind permission of the Haisman Literary Estate
Downtime © Reeltime Pictures, Keith Barnfather, & Marc Platt. Used with permission in Tina Marie DeLucia's "Little Girl Lost."

Text Copyright
The Sparks © 2019 Kara Dennison
Swinging Londons © 2019 Jon Black
Flow © 2019 Niki Haringsma
Cuckoo Clocks That Work © 2019 James Macaronas
The Name of Universes © 2019 James Bojaciuk
Sarah Jane in an Exciting Adventure with the Fauxes © 2019 Anna Maloney
Sarah Jane, Superstar! © 2019 Joshua Wanisko & Lillian Wanisko
Little Girl Lost © 2019 Tina Marie DeLucia
The Interstellar and the Improbable © 2019 Scarlett Ward
When the Stars Come to Man © 2019 William J. Martin
Gifts for Good © 2019 M.H. Norris
The Circles of Drel © 2019 Harry King
Sarah Jane & The Bristolian Vault © 2019 Sophie Iles
Full Circle © 2019 M.H. Norris
Letters from the Heart © 2019 Anne-Laure Tuduri

All rights reserved.

PUBLISHERS NOTE
This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is entirely coincidental.

This not-for-profit anthology is published by Adventures on Earth Productions in order to raise money for the Cancer Research Institute. If you acquired this copy second hand or via piracy, please make a donation.

No effort has been made to supersede the copyright of any characters. All characters remain copyright of their respective owners. The moral rights of the authors have been asserted. Doctor Who and all related elements are copyright BBC and/or their respective owners.

First published 2019

Table of Contents

Who is Sarah Jane Smith?
M.H. Norris 7

The Sparks
Kara Dennison 19

Swinging Londons
Jon Black 31

Flow
Niki Haringsma 119

Cuckoo Clocks that Work
James Macaronas 135

The Name of Universes
James Bojaciuk 149

Sarah Jane in an Exciting Adventure with the Fauxes
Anna Maloney 159

Sarah Jane, Superstar!
Joshua Wanisko & Lillian Wanisko 181

Little Girl Lost
Tina Marie DeLucia 197

The Interstellar and the Improbable
Scarlett Ward.....217

When the Stars Come to Man
William J. Martin.....235

Gifts for Good
M.H. Norris.....279

The Circles of Drel
Harry King.....299

Sarah Jane & The Bristolian Vault
Sophie Iles.....311

Full Circle
M.H. Norris.....329

Letters from the Heart
Anne-Laure Tuduri.....331

Contributors.....341

Who is Sarah Jane Smith?

M.H. Norris

I don't think I realized, at 21, the impact the woman walking down the stairs next to Headmaster Finch would have on me. It had only been a few days ago that I'd started watching *Doctor Who*. I was still a bit confused after experiencing my first regeneration—and then there was this journalist.

She talked to the Doctor like they were old friends. She owned a daft metal dog. She had some anger at the Doctor for dropping her off in the wrong place, and for leaving her, and for never looking back.

She kept showing up. My friends told me she had her own spin-off. And I kept falling more in love. With both Sarah Jane Smith, and the woman who embodied her, Elisabeth Sladen.

Elisabeth Sladen

Everything I've ever heard about Elisabeth Sladen has told me that she was an amazing woman, a strong woman, and one of the most selfless women I've ever heard of.

Did you know that she fell during the filming of *School Reunion* and hurt herself pretty badly? She actually ended up in the A&E and her leg was pretty swollen. And here's what got me. When she wrote about it, she talks about how she powered through because she didn't want to slow down the production. She was in one of the first episodes David Tennant filmed as the Doctor (and—not counting the 50th—some of the last as well), and she didn't want to be the one to slow them down.

Her daughter Sadie and her husband Brain talk about the final months of her life in the epilogue of Sladen's autobiography. She was at her most de-

spondent when she thought about the cast and crew that would be out of work because she was dying. Of the children who would disappointed that the adventures would be unfinished.

"It was typical of her—worry about everyone else when really, she should have been thinking of herself."

Over the course of preparing this book, I've gotten to hear some of my writers share their love and appreciation towards Sarah Jane Smith and Elisabeth Sladen. It's amazing how many met her when they were little, some from when she was traveling in the TARDIS, others from when she defended earth with children.

While Elisabeth Sladen was best known for her role as Sarah Jane Smith, she did so much more. That includes a six week run on *Coronation Street*, and several theater productions—to say nothing of what was perhaps her favorite role: mother.

She came out of retirement, though, to bring the role of Sarah Jane Smith back for a whole new generation.

Who is Sarah Jane Smith?

Sarah Jane Smith is a journalist. She's easily one of Earth's greatest defenders. She's strong, she's independent, she's thick-headed at times. She's had some many adventures and touched so many lives—both in her world and ours.

One of the greatest joys of seeing a character appear in various points over several decades is we get a unique chance to see a character develop like any of us would.

We meet her as a young spunky journalist who will not hesitate to let you know what she's thinking. Even then, her passion for justice, for the truth, and her drive to get to the bottom of whatever she found herself in drove her into events that would lead her into the TARDIS. She's plucky, light, a bit melodramatic—especially when she's frustrated and when things seem overly stacked against her. She's got a fiery passion that is infectious to watch.

The thing is, while some of this was developed by the writers, most of it was driven by Elisabeth Sladen.

As it does with so many characters, her time in the TARDIS changed her. The world was bigger. She'd seen planets and met races and learned so, so much. But her time ended and Sarah Jane was left back where she started, on earth.

That, specifically, changed her. She became harder, a bit colder. Eventually she would earn the nickname of Ice Queen because she emotionally shut herself away from the world around her. After all, who would understand what she saw in those years traveling in time and space?

When she saw the Doctor again, the spark was relit. Luke came, of course,

but also Maria, Clyde, and later Rani and Sky. The kids brought back her youthful spirit a bit (though Lis said they made her feel old at times—she better understood how Jon felt running around with her back in the day).

The melodrama faded, taking on a more subdued tone in her later years. Perhaps she learned to channel it more, or perhaps her years of emotionally shutting herself off did it for her.

But she was still Sarah Jane Smith. She saved the world and dealt with aliens—just living on Earth and living linearly.

Inside the pages of this book, you'll see this amazing woman in many different ways. The book has been broken into five sections, each covering a unique period of her life.

Childhood

While we never learned her exact birthday, Sarah Jane was born in May 1951 to Barbara and Eddie Smith. They died on August 18th of that year. After that, she was raised by her aunt, Lavinia.

During *The Temptation of Sarah Jane Smith*, an adult version of Sarah Jane went back to that day and had a chance to stop her parents' death. That would have allowed the Trickster to conquer the Earth. It forced her to make the decision to let her parents die to save everyone and everything.

Not much is known about her younger years, though some various charity collections have covered it and we got a little information from *The Sarah Jane Adventures.*

Kara Dennison kicks us off with "The Sparks," which gives us the youngest Sarah Jane outside of the infant version in *The Temptation of Sarah Jane Smith*. Even when she's little, she can still find adventure. Too bad it finds her on a not-so-great day, where she's forced to stay in bed until she recovers from a cold. Well, until she can escape…

It was a delight to have Kara Dennison write for this collection and give us this charming story. She's a wonderfully talented author and if you enjoy her story, you should visit her site to find her blog and her other work. You owe it to yourself to check out her light novel series *Owl's Flower*, and all of her work from Altrix Books, Obverse Books, and 18thWall Productions.

UNIT

One thing I love about Sarah Jane is that she introduced me to my favorite Doctor, Jon Pertwee's. With Bessie and his delightful opera cape, he is the James Bond of Doctors.

Let us take a moment and be perfectly honest. Sarah Jane Smith got out of her first adventure with the Doctor by sheer dumb luck.

She posed as her aunt to get into a top secret research facility that was run by UNIT. When people started to disappear from the facility, Brigadier

Alistair Gordon Lethbridge Stewart called in the Doctor to come take a look. Wondering what kind of "research equipment" was in the blue box, Sarah Jane wandered into the TARDIS.

And was still there when the Doctor travelled back to the Middle Ages. Together they stopped the Sontarans for the first time on screen—and the rest was history.

Jon Black celebrates his deep love of the UNIT era in "Swinging Londons." He sets the Doctor and Sarah Jane on an adventure unlike anything I've seen her in. He pays tribute to some beloved characters and his love of the show and the character shines through.

Jon is a master at historical fiction, weaving truth into fun tales of adventure. To see him play with history in such a way was wonderful to watch and his story is the longest here. It was a delight to keep saying "take as long as the story needs" and to let him be free to create. Thank you, Jon, for being willing to donate so much of your time to charity!

And he gave us an adventure.

Jon's *Bel Nemeton* series is a joy to read and I'm excited for more. And, if he references anything historical and you want to know more, he'll happily share where he got the information (he's the only fiction author I know who puts a list of works referenced in his books).

I'd also like to take a moment to thank the Haisman Literary Estate for granting me the honor of allowing my writers to use Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge Stewart in this collection. To get to write two of my favorite companions was something I'll cherish and I think that permission made several stories, Jon's included, a bit more special.

Travel

Sarah Jane had been in the TARDIS for a short time when Jon Pertwee announced he was leaving the show and the news broke that Tom Baker would be taking his place.

In her autobiography, Lis talks about this transition, about Jon telling her he was leaving, about a new Doctor coming. She honestly wondered if the new Doctor would want her.

I read that and I was shocked. How could she think *any* Doctor wouldn't want her? Luckily her fears were unfounded. Tom Baker and Elisabeth Sladen would become dear friends and would stay that way until Lis' death.

If you haven't yet, listen to Tom Baker's *Scratchman*. It's a wonderful adventure with the Fourth Doctor, Sarah Jane and Harry Sullivan. When Tom Baker describes Sarah Jane Smith, you just hear his fondness for the character and, more importantly, for the actress who played her.

The two Doctors were very different from each other, but both were Sarah Jane's Doctor. This set the stage for a series of adventures both in the show

and here in this collection.

Niki Haringsma kicks off this section with their story, "Flow" in which the Doctor and Sarah Jane find themselves helping a race faced with a deadly disease, drones, and something that's not quite right. You can find more of Niki's work in several books from Obverse Books, including *The Book of the Peace*.

James Macaronas sends the pair on an adventure where something's wrong with time itself on an Earth colony in his tale, "Cuckoo Clocks that Work." It talks about the friendship between Sarah Jane and the Doctor and how they bring out the strengths of the other. Or as Lis said, "The years might have passed, I may have matured, but Sarah Jane is still there to puncture the Doctor's ego when she gets the chance." This James is a playwright from Australia; if you happen to be there, see if you have a chance to catch one of his plays.

As I introduce this next story, I want to take a second to thank James Bojaciuk for not only pushing me to put this collection together but being an invaluable friend, editor, formatter, and stand-in secretary who helped me keep this book on track.

This James also contributed a wonderful story called "A Wander of Universes" in which Sarah Jane and the Doctor discuss what to call a group of universes while they save many of them. As well as saving the populations of several universes! As one does!

Investigation

In 1981 it was announced that Sarah Jane would be returning in *K-9 and Company*. There was talk that this Christmas special would become a series starring Sarah Jane and K-9. It was a smash ratings success—even with a power outage that stopped part of the country from watching it!

But we never got more. Thanks to BBC politics, the show never happened. This single episode set up so much that would've made for a wonderful series. Sarah Jane moved back in with her aunt because she'd lost her job. Her aunt has taken in a new ward, a boy named Brendon, who is attending boarding school but dreams of going to the local secondary school. (Apparently Aunt Lavinia has a better library.) And, of course, a certain robot dog which ended up being a Christmas gift from her best friend.

I had a couple of writers decide to place their stories here, in the show that almost was. While we unfortunately couldn't use K-9 for this collection (necessitating the use of an alternate robot friend), *K-9 & Company* is a wonderful, important era of her life that deserved to be explored further.

Anna Maloney kicks us off with "Sarah Jane in an Exciting Adventure with the Fauxes." When musicians are dying at a local venue, Sarah Jane goes to investigate and is joined by some rather fun characters. Anna's love of 60s

music shone through in this (appropriately, as she's something of an expert in that field—her scholarly work on The Beatles is coming next year). She did a marvelous job imagining what a second episode of *K-9 & Company* would've looked like. It feels like a treasure from 80s television, not cliché but just as it was. Her novel *Every Little Thing* is something you should check out

Oh, what to say about our next story. It was the first pitch I received, and I was bouncing around the house in excitement for days. Joshua Wanisko teamed with his daughter, Lillian Wanisko, for "Sarah Jane, Superstar!" This is Lillian's first writing credit and I'm so pleased that this anthology is her debut. What is it about? *What if Sarah Jane's life was turned into a musical?*

While there's nowhere else to find Lillian's fiction (yet!), you can find Joshua in many anthologies (charity or otherwise—particularly his wonderful *A Night in a Lonesome October* fiction) as well as in the Big Finish production *Forever Fallen*.

Sarah Jane made a live-action appearance in 1995 with the direct to video film, *Downtime*. It was a spin-off that re-introduced three Classic companions: Sarah Jane, the Brigadier, and Victoria Waterfield. Victoria was lured by the Great Intelligence with the promise that she would find her father. It was not so and it used Victoria to try and reach its own ends. In the end, Sarah Jane and the Brigadier are reunited—but Victoria is left alone, scared, and deeply hurt.

Tina Marie DeLucia takes us into the 90s and into the aftermath of *Downtime* with "Little Girl Lost." They paint a beautiful tribute to another beloved character whose actress lost her battle to cancer, as Sarah Jane and the Brigadier attempting to find, and help, Victoria.

I'd like to thank Reeltime, Keith Barnfather, and Marc Platt for allowing us to use elements from *Downtime* in Tina's story. Making her story possible gives Victoria's story some closure, if unofficially.

In the early 2000s, Elisabeth Sladen was approached by Big Finish Productions to do some Sarah Jane audios. She did two seasons where she gained some new friends, a guy named Josh and a tech expert named Natalie (who was voiced by Elisabeth's daughter, Sadie). These audios took Sarah Jane into some serious investigations, reminding us that Sarah Jane was a well-known journalist whose career spanned decades.

In the audio series, we find out Sarah Jane is mired in the conflict between two sides of an ancient conspiracy, the White Chapter and the Crimson Chapter. It's not so much that one is "the good side" and the other is the "bad side," so much as one believes an age of light will begin and the other expects the end of the world. It's never clear who Sarah Jane can trust.

I had two people place their stories in this era.

Scarlett Ward's "The Interstellar and the Improbable" brings back another former companion for an adventure that reminds us how creepy an empty tube station can be. Scarlett takes us to right before the start of the Sarah Jane

audios, showing how she turned into the person they present. If that weren't enough, we see how another companion took her own place at the start of another audio spinoff. Scarlett has some other short stories upcoming elsewhere, and you should snap them up the moment they're available, because they're all fabulous.

William J. Martin's Quintessence Quartet return in "When the Stars Come to Man." Having made their first appearance in *Mild Curiosities*, in the novella "Doctor Who in a Very Exciting Adventure with the Eater of Worlds," they've quickly become one of my favorite new creations. I grinned the whole way through that story, so I knew I needed them in this collection. I was so excited when he offered to have Sarah Jane join them on their second adventure.

If you haven't met the Quintessence Quartet, they're superheroes, yes, but they're also a group of people who have had something rather extraordinary happen to them. They are not only making the best but are thriving. Their story started in the 1960s and we discover that they may have had an influence on a young Sarah Jane Smith.

Family

As *Doctor Who* debuted for the second series in 2005, Russell T. Davies talked Elisabeth Sladen out of retirement and Sarah Jane returned to the world of *Doctor Who*. A whole new generation (yours truly included) got to meet the wonderful Sarah Jane Smith.

Her episode hadn't even aired yet when she was invited out by Russel T. Davies to discuss something, her very own show. With the failed attempt in the 1980s, Lis was a little hesitant.

Would people watch *The Sarah Jane Adventures*?

The answer was *yes*. The show ran until shortly after Lis' death, five series in total. It featured Lis as Sarah Jane and she was joined by Maria, Clyde, and her adoptive son, Luke. After the first series, Maria left and was replaced by Rani. In the fifth and final series, Sarah Jane adopts another child, a daughter named Sky.

This is an era I'm extremely fond of. I love the show (it's on Amazon Prime, currently, if you haven't watched it) and I am so pleased that every single Bannerman Road kid is represented in a story.

"Gifts for Good," features Sarah Jane and the Bannerman Road gang meeting up with some familiar faces from her past. This was my contribution to the collection and it was so exciting to have my chance to bring them to life. Luke is heavily featured, being affected by what happened to Clyde in "Mark of the Bezerker."

Harry King approached me about doing a story about crop circles and turned in the delightful tale, "The Circles of Drel." One thing I truly love

watching is when Sarah Jane confronts something pretending to be something she absolutely does not believe in. That really sets off her journalistic side, and she will hunt until she gets to the bottom. It's truly fitting that this story features Rani Chandra, who wants to be a journalist when she grows up. This is Harry's first story, and I hope to see many more from him.

While doing research on areas of her life that we needed to cover, I found an interesting and often forgotten bit of her family. Sarah Jane has a daughter Lauren, who in turn had a daughter named Lily. If you analyze the timeline, Lauren would have had to be born around the time where *Sarah Jane Adventures* ended. In *Short Trips: A Christmas Treasury* there's a story named "Lily," which features her one and only appearance. Sarah Jane is joined by the Fifth Doctor.

Lily seems like so a sweet character, though we don't know much about her beyond she's autistic, so I wanted people to explore this character and this later stage of Sarah Jane's life.

I thought there could and should be more. I thought that both Lily and the spectrum could be better represented. I was intrigued by this idea and wanted people to explore this barely existent timeline.

Sophie Iles has been a wonderful part of this project. She provided the cover for the collection—overcoming an indecisive curator to create something amazing. She also provided all the interior art. A talented writer as well as a talented artist, this book wouldn't have been possible without her.

Her story for this collection starts to bridge the gap from where *The Sarah Jane Adventures* left off to that short story featuring Lily. This takes place about a year after the show ends. Clyde is looking at Universities and brings Sarah Jane along to help. They run into a rather familiar face during their time there. And Sarah Jane just happens to be pregnant…

When putting this collection together, I realized that we didn't have any stories featuring Sky and Maria. I felt like these two characters needed a place so I wrote a small, second piece called "Full Circle." Maria gets to revisit how she entered her life of adventure, and we see just how like her mother Sky has become.

Anne-Laure Tuduri brings this collection to a close with "Letters from the Heart," in which an older Lily messages back and forth with her grandmother. It's a touching story about how a third generation of this family seems to find themselves involved in adventure. Please check out Anne-Laure's other writing and art. You can find her in many anthologies. Though very new to the scene, she's proving to be a talented writer in her own right.

The Charity

When I decided to put this collection together, I wanted to give the proceeds to a charity that focused on cancer research. I settled on the Cancer Research

Institute. They are dedicated to harnessing our immune system's power to control and potentially cure all types of cancer. They fund the most innovative clinical and laboratory research across the world, support the next generation of the field's leaders, and serve as the trusted source of information on immunotherapy for cancer patients and their caregivers.

Their Scientific Director, Dr. James P. Allison, was awarded the 2018 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine alongside Dr. Tasuku Honjo. He was chosen for "his groundbreaking work that helped to propel the field of cancer immunotherapy which has revolutionized cancer treatment over the past decade."

Immunotherapy was announced as the Breakthrough of the year in 2013 and the American Society of Clinical Oncology named it the Clinical Advance of the year in 2016, 2017, and 2018.

Reading about the good immunotherapy is doing for cancer patients, I wanted to donate the funds here so that we can get a step close to finding a cure so that no one else has to lose their battle to cancer.

Thank You

Thank you for taking the time to pick up this book, to have patience with this long-winded interruption, and to read the wonderful stories inside.

Thank you to all of the writers. There wouldn't be a book without you.

Thank you, Sophie and James, for how far above and beyond you've gone.

I hope that this collection does justice to my favorite fictional character, Sarah Jane Smith. I hope that these stories intrigue you to learn more about her, and about Lis Sladen.

Russell T. Davies was right. When he met with Lis Sladen to discuss *The Sarah Jane Adventures*, he told her…

"The world needs more Sarah Jane Smith."



1. CHILDHOOD

The Sparks

Kara Dennison

The autumn sky was bright and clear, with only the occasional tendril of cloud to remind you *just* how blue it was. The air was autumn perfection, carrying the slightest of bites and the aroma of living nature and wood smoke. A gentle breeze ruffled a few turning leaves down from their trees. And there were hours yet to go before sunset and going-indoors time.

This day, of all days in the history of the world, Sarah Jane Smith was stuck in bed with a cold.

To add insult to injury, Aunt Lavinia refused to let her open the window. Not even a crack, just to let a bit of fresh air in. Something about keeping the other bad bugs out so she could get over this one first.

"If you don't rest up now, you'll only be sick longer," had been Aunt Lavinia's argument. And in the standoff between a guardian and a six-year-old, the guardian generally won.

Which wasn't to say she hadn't attempted to sneak outside a few times. But her aunt seemed to have supernatural levels of hearing, no matter how careful Sarah Jane was, and it always ended up with her plopped back in bed. Which is where she'd stayed for last hour or so, too possessed of a cough to stay asleep and too bored to stay awake.

In the end, she lay on her side, drowsily paging through the same picture book over and over. Once in a while she'd lay down her head, only to be awakened by the sound and pain of her own coughing, intruding on her few seconds of sleep like a foreign noise. Then she'd lift her head and start the whole process over again.

Her head drooped for the fifth, perhaps sixth, time and fell sideways onto the pillow.

SKREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

E-BAM!

Sarah Jane bolted upright in bed, sending the picture book tumbling to the floor. She most definitely didn't cough like *that*.

The sound had come from outside, but from what direction, she couldn't be sure. It seemed to come from above and all around all at once, as though echoing through a closed space. Oddly, there was no sound from Aunt Lavinia in the front of the house.

Sarah Jane slipped out of bed and peered out her closed window. Nothing seemed amiss. Everything was quiet and still…but that hardly seemed right. Wouldn't there normally be people coming outside to see what had happened? This was a small town; normally anything out of the ordinary would have at least five of her neighbors out in the street swapping information.

But she knew she hadn't dreamt it.

Carefully, quietly, Sarah Jane opened her bedroom door and tiptoed downstairs, avoiding the creaky spots. The approach to the front door would be the trickiest part. Aunt Lavinia was sitting on the sofa immersed in a book, but her ears seemed finely-tuned enough to hear Sarah Jane's fingers brushing the doorknob. Any second now she'd be told to go back to bed…so she had to get the door open and dash as quickly as possible.

Carefully. Quietly. She turned the doorknob.

The door hitched, as though indisposed to opening, then gave a thin *creeeeeeak.*

But nothing happened.

Sarah Jane looked over her shoulder cautiously at Aunt Lavinia. She was still sitting on the sofa, apparently so deeply interested in what she was reading that even a creaky door didn't set her off. It was strange. Strange and out of character…

But for the moment, Sarah Jane didn't care. She was on a mission. And she could question it later.

She didn't even bother to close the door as she stepped outside, fearing a second noise might break the spell. Not that it much mattered: the weather was cool and pleasant enough that it wouldn't make a difference indoors. Not to mention there was no one else outside, so there was no noise to filter indoors.

"Maybe everyone else is sick, too." Sarah Jane hopped down the front steps, staring at her shoes as she went. Or maybe everyone else had gone to see what made the big noise? That was far more likely.

She scuffled over the road to the stretch of grass opposite their row of houses. It wasn't the best vantage point, but since there were no tall buildings in town, it would be a good start. She turned a full circle, looking up and down and all around for anything even remotely out of the-

There!

Off in the distance, past the church, past the winding back roads of houses and smaller shops, something was shining up into the sky. It was a pale blue light, like a spotlight pointed straight up. But brighter. Bolder. It didn't fade out at all, seeming to shine up forever.

That was it.

On a better day, Sarah Jane would have torn off running in the direction of the mysterious light. But her chest felt raw as she breathed in the cool autumn air, and occasionally she'd lapse into a tiny coughing fit. Running would only make it worse. Getting there slowly would be better than not getting there at all.

What's this strange blue light in the

sky? Is the local theatre playing with new lights? Is it something come in from one of the bigger cities? Or…somewhere else entirely? Sarah Jane imagined her words in tidy newsprint, a photo of the light beaming up into the sky next to it.

Oh, but she'd need a headline. Good headlines were important. If you didn't have a good title, no one would read on. Something that would look exciting in big, bold print—

"Well, hello there!"

Sarah Jane was jolted out of her thoughts by the voice. It had come from somewhere to her left, a pleasant grown-up lady's voice. There was a smile in it—she could tell, even without having seen the speaker.

"Is it safe for you to be out on your own in the middle of the day? You really ought to be home."

Aunt Lavinia's exhortations to never speak to strangers never made much sense to Sarah Jane. After all, she knew everyone in town, and they all knew her. The only people she didn't know were on the television. But when she looked up at the lady, she felt a sudden strange tickle at the back of her mind. Standing in front of her was someone she'd never seen before, and who didn't come with a friend of family seal of approval in the same moment. This was one of those mythical "strangers" in the flesh.

Not that she looked like anything that needed to be avoided. She was tall, slim, and pleasant-faced, with dark hair pulled up in a bun and a sprinkle of freckles across her nose. And she was dressed tidily, in a trim, dark green skirt suit. She could have been a news reader or a very nice teacher.

"I'm fine, thank you," Sarah Jane responded politely, but the mere lack of recognition had spring-loaded her legs. She was ready to get back in motion as soon as she was allowed.

"Oh, but I'm sure there's someone at home worried about you. They wouldn't want you wandering around like this."

They were completely off-script now. Aunt Lavinia had warned that the bad sort of strangers always wanted you to come with them somewhere, or that they would try to bribe you away with the promises of sweets to eat or a puppy to play with.

But somehow, being told to go home felt even more wrong in the moment. Like something was being hidden.

The lady smiled a kind teacher's smile.

"All right," Sarah Jane said quietly. "I will. Thank you."

"There's a good girl." The lady patted Sarah Jane on the head, dropping a sweet into her hand. "Go on before someone frets."

The lady went on her way silently. Sarah Jane watched her for a few moments, then looked back down at the sweet in her hand. It was round, wrapped with shiny green foil with two twists at the end. She tugged it open. The sweet inside was a sort of medicinal greenish-brown and smelled more of a throat lozenge than sugar. Discreetly, she dropped it on the ground and headed back toward the row of houses, still following the light.

At least if I'm near a house, she thought, *I can just go in and pretend it's my house if she bothers me again.*

Conveniently, the walkway she was on led right in the direction she wanted

to go: up the hill and between two close-set rows of houses. It was a familiar-enough path, as close to the church as it was. Carpenter on the left, lady constantly trying to sell her bad paintings of bowls of fruit on the right. Beyond this was a small dog park, then more houses, then a forest that was *technically* outside town and thus off-limits to Sarah Jane. She wasn't terribly good at judging distances, so she couldn't tell how far off the light was.

Despite her desire to sneak into the unknown, Sarah Jane desperately hoped whatever was giving off the light was inside town. She was already prickling all over with nerves—likely a combination of the strange lady talking to her and the constant knowledge that she was sneaking around behind Aunt Lavinia's back. Breaking yet another rule might be too much entirely.

Then again…

Sarah Jane stopped and stared at the blue light beaming out over the trees, taking it in more carefully. She wasn't especially close to it yet as far as she could tell, but stopping and focusing on it at least let her take more in.

For one thing, now that she could take a better look, it wasn't entirely blue. It was more of a bright white, with blue sparks swirling around it like stars. The sparks would wink in and out of view as they spiraled around the beam, almost like little reflective mirrors catching its light and intensifying it.

For another thing, her previous observation hadn't been an exaggeration at all: the beam really *did* seem to go on forever. No matter how hard she squinted, she couldn't see a point at which it started to fade. It just went up and up forever, and she almost fancied it must stick out from the Earth into outer space like a toothpick from an orange.

Was there anything in the world that could make a light like this, glimmering and sparkling out into the universe with no end in sight? She'd never heard of any such thing. It didn't seem…well. It didn't seem *human.*

Her shoulders shook, and she barked out a sudden cough. She'd been so wrapped up in staring up at the odd sight, she'd almost forgotten why she wasn't supposed to be out in the first place. Her throat was cold inside and out. She almost…*almost*...understood why Aunt Lavinia always nagged her to bundle up.

She wanted a scarf. She wanted a camera. She wanted a notepad and a pencil. Her little fingers fluttered nervously. She could be figuring out what this was! She could be telling everyone! Oh, what if this *wasn't* normal? Wouldn't people want to know? What if it was magic…magic, or *alien?*

The walkway ahead disappeared into a pile of leaves left untended by the owner of the closest house. Legs jiggling with excitement and purpose, Sarah Jane dashed over the road to the opposite sidewalk-

"Remember, Sarah, look both ways?"

"Even if there's no one around? Even if I know where I am?"

"Always. You never know what could happen."

Sarah Jane had never considered what it might feel like, being at the business end of a moving car. Time seemed to grind to a crawl. She heard

the sound. She looked up. She saw the car bearing down on her. Through the windscreen, she could just barely make out the familiarly unfamiliar face of the woman from earlier, set sternly as though on a mission.

Her mind froze; her legs didn't.

Nervous energy and inertia carried her those few last inches forward, and the car *whuffed* past her back. And then it was over. No engine sound, no time for her to catch it going by on the other side. If not for the gust of wind against her back, she'd have believed she imagined it.

The nervous energy drained out of her, replaced with sudden dread that prickled her skin even harder. She sank down onto the sidewalk and buried her face in her hands, crying quietly. Her own voice sounded small and thin in the autumn air, as though she were the only thing around in that moment.

When she'd caught her breath, Sarah Jane looked up at the beam again. It still shone in the distance. But she didn't want to walk or run right now; she only wanted to hide. The side door of the town church was just around the corner of the row of houses facing her, and in the moment of fear and confusion, it seemed inviting.

She walked slowly through the side gate, up the path through the tiny cemetery, and into the church. It was dim and quiet, smelling slightly of incense and dust, and for a moment she could understand why so many movies would show scenes of people ducked down quietly in pews. It was like a quiet hug from an ancient, caring friend.

Sarah Jane crawled up into one of the short back pews to catch her breath, pulling her knees up to her chest. Despite the silence, she wasn't the only one there; one or two other locals occupied nearby pews, their heads bowed in prayer or thought. That was Mr. Wilkins on the far side of the aisle, still wearing his cap even though his wife always fussed at him to take it off indoors. And a few rows back was Jenny Goodwin, the girl whose cat kept escaping and ending up on people's roofs. Both were still and quiet…almost worryingly so. Not even the shadows from the flickering candles moved over them.

Wait.

Sarah Jane looked up at the candelabra to her left.

The flames weren't moving. They were caught mid-flicker, like a photograph.

She stood up on the seat of the pew and waved a hand in front of the candle flames. They didn't move. Her shadow rippled over the candles and the wall behind, but that was the only sign of movement.

Neither Mr. Wilkins or Jenny Goodwin seemed to have noticed any noise coming from behind them. Could it be they…?

"Hey!" Sarah Jane shouted, her voice hoarse. "Hey, Mr. Wilkins! Hey, Miss Goodwin!"

Nothing. Not a twitch. Even her own voice seemed choked at the source, small and thin as though the air around her refused to carry it.

The idea of approaching either person terrified Sarah Jane. She didn't want to look at them, still and corpse-like, any closer than was necessary. But she wanted to know more. She wanted information.

She hopped down from the pew

and went to…Jenny. That would be a little easier; Mr. Wilkins's craggy old face frozen in place was a horrifying prospect. So she went to the girl instead, gently touching her sleeve. The fabric moved stiffly under her touch, as though aware of what it ought to be doing but not terribly disposed to doing so.

"J-Jenny?" Sarah Jane whispered. It was all she could do, even knowing her voice wasn't carrying at the best of times. "It's me. Sarah Jane. Can you hear me?"

The girl's face was quiet and contemplative, pointed down at her hands in her lap, as though simply lost in thought. But Sarah Jane could see that there was no rise and fall of her chest. She didn't blink. She was frozen in place, like a waxwork.

Terrified, Sarah Jane ran from the church and stumbled outside. But now, her ears were better tuned to what she'd been missing before.

Nothing.

There was literally nothing. No sound. No wind. No birds. The only noises she could make out were her own breathing and the hesitant crunch of autumn leaves under her feet. Like Jenny Goodwin's sleeve under her hand, the leaves and grass under her feet moved as though forced against their nature to do so.

That was why Aunt Lavinia hadn't noticed her leaving. She couldn't. The whole town was frozen.

Except her. And the strange woman.

Two questions, then. Question one: was the whole world like this, or just their town? Question two: was it because of the light?

Wait, no. Three questions. Why was she okay and nobody else?

She scrambled down the stone steps leading away from the opposite side of the church. A nearby fence cut off the small town from the next one over, with a wide road between the two. Just over the road and within view was a primary school. If there were children moving around there, that would be all the answer she needed.

Sarah Jane leaned against the fence and peered out. Sure enough, there were a few students walking in from the playground. They seemed unaffected and unaware.

She thought to shout out to them, but decided against it. It was unlikely they'd hear her from all the way over the road, anyway. Besides, her throat was tickling something terrible, and a shout might send her into coughing fits. She'd found out what she wanted to, though: the effect was contained.

Sarah Jane slipped one tiny hand through the links in the fence. She'd only managed to reach a few inches before something shocked her fingers like winter static. She winced, pulling her hand back and looking at her fingertips.

A few blue sparks clung to her fingertips, then faded.

It was the beam of light. Whatever it was, it had the town frozen in place. But why? And, more importantly, for how long?

Sarah Jane was well past caring how sick she made herself. After all—as far as she knew—she was the only person in town who knew what was going on. And if she didn't figure things out soon, a cold might be the least of her problems.

She ran back in the direction of the

beam of light, keeping to sidewalks and shade. The strange woman hadn't reemerged recently, to the point that Sarah Jane had almost forgotten to take her into account. But trotting past the spot where she'd nearly been run over brought the memory back.

Who was she? Was she responsible for the strange light in the sky? Why was she here? And…really, honestly, who *cared* about their little town enough to make something like this happen?

Sarah Jane didn't think to be suspicious of her uninterrupted progress to the beam of light. She was too excited, too curious. There was something she didn't understand. Something that made no sense. Something that might well be from somewhere else. She was scared, yes. Confused, too. But as she approached the source of the light, she felt another emotion over take the fear and confusion:

Excitement.

She was about to see something strange and impossible. She didn't even know what it was yet. But she was going to see it, and perhaps be the first person in the world to do so. The thought of what it meant for everyone around her had slipped backwards into a secondary concern. There would be time to cope with that once she'd had the first moment of discovery.

Her head was spinning from anticipation. She was shivering all over. Shivering and exhausted. (Oh, dear, that was probably the cold, too.) But she could handle it just a bit longer. She could make it just far enough to see what was happening. Once she'd seen for herself—

"And I think *that* is just about *enough* of that."

A pair of strong hands grabbed Sarah Jane by the waist, sweeping her up into the air. For the briefest of moments, she caught a glimpse of something in the dog park ahead of her: a lattice of bright blue light, shaped like an upside-down bowl big enough to cover a small house, and a dark shape inside it.

"Let me go!" Sarah Jane shrieked, but her shouts were weak in her own ears.

The voice—the familiarly unfamiliar one—chuckled. "And just who are you yelling for? It's just you and me right now, Miss Sarah Jane Smith."

Sarah Jane stopped struggling against the hands, still tense in the woman's grip. The woman knew her name. She hadn't said it before. She *knew* that. The fear of being known by a stranger, coupled with the realization that it really *was* just the two of them in the frozen town, made her fall silent.

Admittedly, it was also partly the exhaustion catching up to her. She felt oddly dizzy, and her body couldn't seem to make up its mind whether it wanted to be under a dozen blankets or in a bath of ice. The sudden physical proof of just why she'd been told to stay home that day whittled away her last bit of resistance, and she fell limp.

"That's better. Now, what do you think of us having a little chat?"

"Mm." Sarah Jane pursed her lips and turned her head away.

The woman sighed. "Well, that's fine. You don't really have to say anything." She tucked Sarah Jane under her arm like an unruly pet, pointedly facing her *away* from the area of interest, and began strolling slowly back to the middle of town. As angry as she

was, Sarah Jane was almost relieved she was being carried, even if the position she was in was making the blood rush to her head a bit.

"So, first things first." The woman spoke calmly but efficiently. The kindly teacher overlay of earlier was gone, but her tone wasn't threatening. "I know what you're worried about. This won't last forever. I'd give it five minutes at best. Worst case scenario, things kick back into gear sometime overnight. You'll be fine. So will everyone else."

"Is that true?"

The woman looked down at Sarah Jane with a smile, not breaking her stride. "Of course it's true. No reason to lie. Everything will be back to normal before tomorrow, and it will be like none of this ever happened."

Sarah Jane coughed uncomfortably. "I saw you in that car."

"Oh." The woman threw her a thin smile. "So you did."

There was no more conversation, and Sarah Jane was too tired to press it. She closed her eyes briefly, then opened them again. The woman's shoes pressed into the grass and leaves just as Sarah Jane's had, seemingly pressing them to move against their will.

She closed her eyes again.

Opened them again.

She was looking at her own front steps.

"Oh, dear. I suppose I'd best just put you to bed. You're in no condition to walk yourself up."

"No…" *No strangers in the house,* she thought as forcefully as she could. But the woman strode in, closing the door behind her casually. Sarah Jane didn't have the strength to lift her head, but she assumed Aunt Lavinia hadn't moved from her spot earlier that day.

She closed her eyes again.

This time when she opened them, she was lying down in her own bed, the unfamiliar woman tucking her in like a concerned nurse. Sarah Jane squirmed and tried to mumble something, but she didn't have the strength. The woman walked out.

She closed her eyes.

"—a story? I do hate putting children to bed without a story."

Now there was a cool cloth on her forehead, and the woman was sitting on the edge of Sarah Jane's bed.

"What did you do?" she asked weakly.

"I put you to bed because you went and made yourself sicker. And now I'm going to insist you stay in bed. Things should probably be started up again by the time you're well enough to get up. Your mum won't have noticed a thing."

"It's…my aunt."

The woman smiled. "Ah. Of course." She rubbed her palms together thoughtfully. "A story, then."

"You tried to kill me."

"I never kill children, Miss Smith. Goes against my beliefs."

"How do you know me?" Sarah Jane pressed. Closing her eyes and sleeping felt like a wonderful idea. But she wanted answers.

"I promised you a story."

Sarah Jane shook her head weakly. "You were mean. Now you're nice."

"I'm afraid I've been nice the whole time, dear. But I can see why it wouldn't seem that way." She folded her hands in her lap and looked up at the ceiling of the room…or beyond it,

perhaps.

"Once upon a time. That's how they start, eh? Once upon a time, there was a beast from a far-off land. It was very old, and very wise. But it was also very friendly and very foolish. It loved to make friends wherever it went, not knowing that its friendship was a curse. The very people this beast cared about would find nothing but sadness in that care.

"Fortunately, most people knew better than to befriend the beast. It scared them with its power, its strangeness. But once in a while, one would come along whose reaction wasn't fear, but curiosity. These people would run to the beast, craving its friendship and everything that came with it. It wasn't that they didn't know what lay in store. On the contrary, they did: and they did not mind.

"All these people had one thing in common: sparks. Moments in their lives that had taught them not to be careful. Moments that had lured them to danger with the promise of discovery. And the strange, friendly, dangerous beast reawakened the sparks. That is how it found its friends, you see: it could see the sparks, too.

"Do you know what happens to all its friends? …No? Well, neither do I. Neither does anyone. Some would come home once they saw the error of their ways. Some returned, but changed forever. Some simply disappeared, never to be heard from again. Even so, the beast collected them, one after the other, knowing its own curse, and not caring."

Lola took a breath, but before the next words came out, she caught Sarah Jane's eyes close, her head lolling slightly to the side in welcome sleep.

"Ah, well. You'll never hear the story of how the beast was slain. Shame…then again, it hasn't happened yet, has it?"

She closed the little girl's bedroom door gently behind herself, then slipped out of the house. Though why she was being quiet, she didn't know. The stabilization field was still firmly in place, and she hadn't seen any rescue ships on her radar in the last hour or so. The only conscious things for miles were herself and the girl — the latter likely unaffected by the stabilization field thanks to her little immune system already being in overdrive when it had kicked in. Whoever was sending out the distress beacon, they likely had a boring night ahead of them.

Lola, on the other hand, had no such luxury.

It would take about half an hour to pop the exterior off her cramped little ship (thank God the girl had been too young to question the accuracy of the chassis—it wouldn't go into production for another six years), then another twenty minutes or so to generate enough energy to get out of the stabilization field and into orbit. Fortunately, losing nearly an hour to just getting your junker off the ground was less of an issue when time travel was in play.

An hour later, Lola was back on track, looking over her list. Elise and Arthur Banning, done. The twins had been a simple matter of a traffic detour away from a sentient meteorite. Patrexi, done. An extra dose of sleeping draught and she'd slept through the ancient astronaut who wandered into her temple. Corazón… done. With prejudice. She always hated those

ones.

She flipped through the names. As it stood, she could make a ten-year jump maximum in either direction. She'd have to plan carefully.

Ah. Chesterton and Wright. An unexpected meteor shower nine years from now. Nothing simpler.

She set the coordinates with one hand, crossing Sarah Jane Smith's name off with the other in red pen.

"You'll thank me," Lola muttered. "Really."

"I don't know *how* you got this bad." Aunt Lavinia stared at the thermometer in disbelief. "Did you have your window open?"

"Mm-mm." Sarah Jane shook her head weakly.

"And I know you didn't go outside. I would have noticed."

Sarah Jane pulled her duvet up to her chin.

Aunt Lavinia sighed, pressing her hand to Sarah Jane's face, then her cheek. "Bear up. I expect it'll break soon. But I want you to stay here even if you start feeling better. No one ever got sicker being cautious. All right?"

"Mm." Sarah Jane curled up on her side and pulled the blankets closer. Aunt Lavinia eventually left, pulling the door closed.

Sarah Jane rolled over onto her back again, staring at the ceiling.

Had it all been a dream? Aunt Lavinia hadn't said anything strange about the day or the time. Either she'd dreamed it all, or her aunt was doing that grownup thing of pretending that things that make sense don't exist.

She'd have to check the dog park when she was feeling better. If there had been something there, there would be marks on the ground, wouldn't there? And she could ask Mr. Wilkins and Jenny Goodwin if they'd been at church yesterday. They'd at least remember going, right?

If it was all dream, that was that, of course. She'd had strange dreams before, so it wouldn't be anything new. If it wasn't, though…

If it wasn't…

She sat up, looking out her bedroom window at the sky.

If that strange, lonely beast really was out there, then she'd get to be its friend someday.



2. U.N.I.T

Swinging Londons

Jon Black

CHAPTER ONE

Sarah Jane wrapped herself protectively around the young girl as a distant thud and tremor announced another explosion rocking the city above Aldwych Station. Normally, Sarah Jane wouldn't have thought much of a mother who lost her child. Under the circumstances…she could make some allowances.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" The dim, red emergency lights made the child look strange. Of course, so did everybody else.

"Rowan," the toddler answered between heavy sobs. The girl was a crier.

"Well, Rowan, I'm pleased to meet you. My name is Sarah Jane Smith. Don't worry, we'll find your mum when this is over."

Sarah Jane's words must have projected a confidence she did not feel. Wiping tears away with balled-up fists, the child nodded trustingly and crawled into her lap.

The cold concrete platform underneath contrasted with the warm bodies pressing in all around. Sarah Jane tried to distract Rowan with nursery rhymes, songs, and any other bits of nonsense her brain could conjure up under the circumstances. It helped a little, but no one could truly be at ease in these conditions.

"Not quite 'no one,'" Sarah Jane thought as her eyes shifted left. There, a women wearing a garish pantsuit, and looking as if she made a virtue of never missing a meal, not only slept but snored with a gusto rivaling the rockets falling above.

Another explosion rocked the station. Closer than the others, the resulting tremor caused little inverted plumes of earth to fall into the station between gaps in its brick ceiling.

This is wrong. Not just being crowded into the Underground with a thousand strangers while rockets pummeled London above. Of course that felt wrong, human beings weren't built for such privations. No, some-

thing more *fundamental* was wrong.

Why were the French bombing London, for instance?

Intellectually she knew the answers, both of them.

Proximately? The French were incensed about piracy by Britain's Dutch allies. Whitehall denied supporting the privateers. Sarah Jane wasn't so sure. She'd just returned from journalistic assignment to Harwich, the closest UK port to the Netherlands, where an unmarked but heavily secured facility did a thriving business loading nondescript cargo containers onto Dutch freighters.

Ultimately? This was merely the latest Anglo-French conflict resulting from 600 years of competing claims and counterclaims on Normandy.

All of that was *true*. But it didn't feel *right*.

"Do you think this will be the big one?" At first, Sarah Jane thought someone had addressed the question to her. Looking down the row, she spotted two crusty old men. With their thinning hair, wrinkled faces, and spotted hands, they looked as if they might have been veterans of the last war. It was to one of them that the other had spoken.

"Don't know," his companion confided. "Seems like only a matter of time before somebody drops a bloody atomic into a rocket. Or gas. Or plague."

"Sssh!" Sarah Jane said, glancing down. Her message was clear. Don't frighten the child.

"Beg your pardon," the closer of the men apologized. Rowan, fortunately, appeared unperturbed. Maybe she hadn't heard. Or, perhaps, she was too young to understand. Either way, Sarah Jane was grateful.

She hoped the men were wrong. With barely 30 kilometers separating England from France, only a fool would use such weapons. Of course, human beings were sometimes foolish. "Goodness knows, the Doctor has said that often enough," she told herself. It was a strange thought to pop into Sarah Jane's head. After all, she didn't know anyone called "the Doctor."

Suddenly, the main lights popped on. The fluorescents replaced the emergencies' red glow with a less unnatural white. A moment later, standing atop the stairs to the exit, an air raid warden sounded three quick, sharp blasts on his air horn. "Okay, folks, the rockets have stopped. All clear. For now. You can go home. Be safe out there."

Moving against the stream of hustling and bustling Londoners exiting Aldwych Station, Sarah Jane called out "Rowan's mother! I'm looking for Rowan's mother." It only took a minute.

Sarah Jane saw where Rowan got it from. The mother, hardly more than a girl herself, was a crier, too. She thanked Sarah Jane profusely between big, fat tears. Taking her daughter in her arms, the mother planted kisses on Rowan's face and head.

Doubting she had done more than solve a small problem in a world of much larger ones, Sarah Jane joined the queue returning to the surface. Whatever remained of it, at any rate. Climbing the steps, she passed so close to the warden she could have reached out and touched him. His face struck her as vaguely familiar, though the big blue and white BENTON on his name plate didn't place him. And yet, the

curious fashion in which his eyes lingered on her suggested reciprocity.

"Thank you, Sgt. Benton," she said as she passed.

"You're welcome, Ma'am. Take care up there."

Exiting on to the Strand, she found the streets empty as people scattered into the night, eager to clutch at the façade of normality. But it was only a façade. Private vehicles, including taxis, were banned from the streets to keep roadways clear for police, fire, and ambulance traffic. Buses were, grudgingly, allowed in areas that had not been damaged. Clusters of sirens sounded from various points around the city, like the chorus of a Greek Tragedy. Smelling smoke, Sarah Jane fancied she could feel heat from the fires the French rockets inevitably set. It reminded her she had journalistic duties.

Cutting from the Strand over onto Aldwych Street, she hunted for something specific: a multistory building with one of those exterior iron fire escapes that had been popular during the 1920s and 30s. She found one in the alley behind the Novello Theatre. It was just low enough.

With a running leap, Sarah Jane managed to hook her arms over the escape's bottom rung. Kicking at the wall with her legs, she pushed herself up and gained solid footing. That was the hard part. After that, the fire escape wasn't really different than any other set of stairs.

From the Novello's rooftop, she surveyed London. It saddened her to see the glows of no less than half a dozen fires in various directions. The fire brigades had their work cut out for them tonight. Sarah Jane pulled out her camera. Widening the aperture and slowing the shutter speed to compensate for the darkness, she photographed the nearest blaze. Though professionally obliged to try, she doubted the photos would amount to much. The film in her camera was quite the wrong speed, selected for her daytime visit to Harwich.

But is that really where she'd been? That didn't feel right either.

Having shot every exposure on the roll and deciding against loading another, Sarah Jane returned her camera to its case. Preparing to leave, she noted the worst of the blazes was eastward, toward Whitechapel.

Lightning might not strike the same place twice, Sarah Jane thought, but history seemed fond of pummeling the same locations over and over.

Carefully lowering herself from the fire escape, it was just a short drop to the alley below. Landing, after taking a moment to straighten herself, Sarah Jane prepared to return home. It had been a very long day.

As she walked, a second set of footfalls echoed through the alleyway behind the Novello. Sarah Jane had the curious notion it might be the air raid warden from the station. Just as curiously, she found the thought appealing. Turning around, she instead encountered something out of one of the Gothic novels she'd loved as a girl. A figure wearing a dark, heavy robe trailed her; the unusual garment concealed his face and extremities.

Sarah Jane had no desire to encounter so odd a stranger under such uncanny circumstances. Heading toward Aldwych Street, she picked up her pace. When her pursuer did likewise, Sarah Jane decided to stop playing

games. Passing a busted ceramic drainpipe descending from the Novello's roof, Sarah Jane snatched up a pipe fragment about the length of her forearm ending in a wicked point. Clutching the improvised weapon to her chest, she bolted for the bright lights of the main street…and heard the robed figure sprinting to keep up. Steeping from the alley back onto what should have been Aldwych Street, darkness more complete than any she remembered engulfed her.

As bright light blinded Sarah Jane, she fought to keep disorientation from blossoming into full blown panic. Her pulse raced and adrenaline pumped through her body as if she'd been fleeing something. Someone?

Confused circadian rhythms proclaimed it *had* been nighttime. As her eyes adjusted to the sunlight, Sarah Jane confirmed no one followed her. She was quite alone on a street not far from her flat. Picking up the sounds of a nearby crowd, she walked toward the noise.

The neighborhood's main road had been cordoned off. Instead of motors, dozens of fit-looking men ran down the street, each with a number pinned to their runner's shirt. Watching, thousands more people lined each side of the road. Many of the spectators waved little flags. While most were red, white, and blue Union Jacks, the flags of other nations dotted the crowd, and more than a few banners bore the five interlocking Olympic rings. Confusion again overtook her. Somehow, the notion that the Olympics were in London was at once alien and familiar.

Sarah Jane needed to steady her nerves. Few things accomplished that so well as the guilty pleasure of grease and starches. After taking a few photos of the marathoners, she ducked down a side street leaving both the race and the crowds behind…only to have another anomaly present itself. Where she was certain her favorite kebab shop should have been, she found a rather dingy-looking newsagent and sundries store.

Hesitantly pushing her way inside, Sarah Jane found its interior confirmed the impressions offered by its exterior. Neither especially well-tended nor especially well-stocked, it seemingly received only as much attention as required to keep patrons from walking another block to the next newsagent. The portly proprietor briefly cast a sidelong glance in her direction before returning attention to the tiny television on the counter.

If she couldn't have a kebab, perhaps a candy bar would do the trick. Pacing along, scanning the various confections displayed on wire racks, a familiar voice stopped Sarah Jane in her tracks. She spun around. If it was the proprietor who'd spoken, he gave no sign of it. But there wasn't anyone else in the shop. Only after a moment did she realize the voice came from the television.

From his stoic features to his dark caterpillar mustache, the man on the screen appeared the very incarnation of Britain's older "stiff upper lip" generation. Though Sarah Jane's mind screamed recognition, the man's conservatively-tailored gray suit seemed wrong. Somehow, a uniform would have looked more appropriate.

"What's going on?" she asked the proprietor.

"It's the bloody PM, isn't it? About

the Olympics."

Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart is prime minister? As some corner of her brain found the man's name Sarah Jane's tone made the sentence somewhere between a statement and a question.

"I know, I can't believe it either," the proprietor scoffed. Looking Sarah Jane over as if really seeing her for the first time, he gave her an affectionate, greasy smile. "Nice to know I'm not the only one in this neighborhood who votes Labour."

Eyes riveted to the tiny screen, she listened as the Prime Minister touted London's hosting of the summer games as a victory for Britain, its place in the world, and its vision for the future.

"Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart," Sarah Jane repeated while shaking her head. She couldn't shake the certainty that she knew the man…but from some other context. She bought a candy bar and a newspaper. Taking her change, she headed for the door before pausing.

"Can I ask you an odd question?" she called back to the proprietor.

He nodded.

"Britain is at peace, right?"

He nodded. "The Soviets are playing nice and, under McGovern, the Americans aren't poking the bear for once. Why?"

"Oh, it's nothing." For a moment, she'd had the weird notion the country was at war. With the French, of all things. Accepting the proprietor's answer, she shook the silly idea from her head.

After hailing a cab to carry her home around streets blocked off for the marathon, she absentmindedly munched her candy bar while perusing the paper. Its headline story read like a continuation of the broadcast in the newsagent's.

Prime Minister Lethbridge-Stewart presented London's securing the Summer Olympics—"stolen" some said from under the nose of presumed front-runner Munich—as a major accomplishment for his country. Though it wasn't doing any favors for Britain's half-hearted steps toward joining the Common Market. Reading further, Sarah Jane better understood the Prime Minister's position. The man didn't have a lot else to be happy about. Almost since the beginning of his government, he'd been crunched between Harold Wilson's Labour Party and rebellious Tory backbenchers led by an MP named Thatcher.

Elsewhere on page one, another article shed light on that second relationship. The press were scrutinizing a remark by the prime minister to the backbencher that "If the member for Finchley believes the most dangerous thing the universe contains are communists, I suggest she should broaden her horizons." Indeed, to all appearances, Lethbridge-Stewart himself seemed as baffled as anyone by his statement. Startled, Sarah Jane noticed the article's byline: her own. Overcome by *jamais vu*, she ceased reading an article she couldn't remember writing.

Glancing out the window, Sarah Jane caught sight of a figure striding purposely along the pavement, trying to keep up with her cab. A figure distinctive for the full-length black robe surrounding him. Strangely, the figure elicited no special notice or concern from other pedestrians. Though there

was no way the cloaked pursuer could keep up with her vehicle, even the mere sight of him triggered anxiety in her. And the certainty she'd encountered the man somewhere before.

"Can you go any faster?" she asked her driver.

As the driver accelerated, Sarah Jane had the curious sensation that he'd slammed on the breaks instead. Continuing forward toward the back of the driver's seat, Sarah Jane flew into darkness.

The creature which thought of herself as Sarah Jane Smith, though she didn't know why, walked across the grass-covered rolling plain she called "London." As cool wind tousled her hair, she again pondered the remarkable fact of her existence. With her upright stature and soft, pinkish exterior, to say nothing of her tools and her artificial coverings, she was unique, unlike anything else that existed. Certainly she was not like the herds of slow moving beetles, some as big as a small lorry (but what was a lorry?). Nor was she like the packs of smaller horseshoe crab things that sometimes preyed on them.

As she did a couple times daily, Sarah Jane walked down the marshy valley to drink. In her mind, she always imagined "The Thames" as something incalculably larger and more important than the tiny stream meandering across the valley floor. As always, she departed rapidly after quenching her thirst. Sarah Jane didn't care for the way unseen creatures thrashed about beneath the waters of the valley's countless brackish oxbows.

Returning to her shelter, she passed one of the horseshoe crabs. Separated from its pack, it chirped and clicked loudly while struggling against the clump of the carnivorous grass which entangled it. Approaching, Sarah Jane engaged in a ritual she didn't quite understand. Taking the "camera" from its "case," she aimed it at the scene and pressed the camera's button several times.

Something about the clicking noises the trapped animal made, aggravated, frustrated, maybe even fearful, touched Sarah Jane. Restoring the camera to its case, she took the sharp fragment of rock-that-wasn't-quite-rock into her hands. Quickly, not giving the grass time to engulf her as well, she used the shard to cut the horseshoe crab lose. As soon as the creature was free, it skittered beyond the reach of the grass's tendrils.

Continuing on her way, aware of sounds behind her, Sarah Jane looked over her shoulder. The horseshoe crab followed at a distance. The creatures had never bothered her before. She didn't think they even registered her as potential prey. And, anyway, when hunting, they scuttled with a speed surprising for their bulky appearance. Seeing no reason to fear, she dismissed the creature with a, "Shoo! Shoo!"

Undeterred, it followed her all the way to the high boulder she used for protection and privacy from the world's other inhabitants. After she climbed atop the rock, the horseshoe crab looked up at her from the field of pebbles and stone scree surrounding the boulder.

"Shoo! Go home!" she repeated once more.

Laying on her bedding of soft, and non-carnivorous, grasses, Sarah Jane consumed several fruits she'd gathered

from shrubs dotting the plain. The purple, quince-like fruits were the only things she trusted to eat. Hunger momentarily abated, Sarah Jane settled in for a nap. She slept often. More often than she thought she should. But there wasn't a lot to do here. Anyway, she liked her dreams, even if she couldn't explain them. As always, excitement, activity, and other beings like her filled her slumber.

Sarah Jane awoke with a start. Something brushed up against her. The horseshoe crab thing snuggled next to her body. Its contented clicking reminded her of the purr of a cat, whatever that was.

"How did you get up here?" she asked. Ceasing its noise, it regarded her with what she imagined to be curiosity. Standing and peering over the edge, Sarah Jane saw that the animal had piled scree against the boulder until it created a mound large enough to climb on top.

"Clever creature," she said, running a hand over its smooth carapace.

"Clever creatures," the words echoed in Sarah Jane's mind. The Doctor had said that. But who *was* the Doctor? The question was important. She could feel it.

"Clever creatures," she whispered, repeating it to herself like a mantra. This time, with those two words, something came back to her.

"Human beings are clever creatures, Sarah," he told her one day in the TARDIS, his mane of white hair shaking out over the wide lapels of his antique jacket. "But in a universe of Cybermen, Draconians, Eternals, Rutans, Sontrans, Silurians, Time Lords, and Xarmyth, be wary of considering yourself anything more than that."

Sarah Jane understood that, in the Doctor's charmingly genteel yet frequently patronizing way, he'd meant it as a caution not an insult. Still, unable to miss that on a cosmic scale he'd put the entire human race on par with cocker spaniels, she could respond with nothing more favorable than a pained smile.

"Clever creatures," she scoffed while absently-mindedly petting the horseshoe crab. This time, with those two words, *everything* came back to her.

CHAPTER TWO

She'd been on the M4 driving back after covering a story in Bristol. Somewhere around Slough, traffic came to a complete stop. Cars stretched ahead of her to the horizon. After a moment, she noticed the other side of the motorway was deserted. Nothing was coming out of London.

Minutes stretched into an hour. An hour stretched into two. Restless, needing to be doing something, Sarah Jane grabbed her camera and exited the car. Her reporter's instinct said there was a story at the front of this traffic jam. After walking a quarter hour, with no end in sight to the queue of idling motors leading into distance, she felt tempted to throw in the towel and return to her car. Then Sarah Jane spotted the young mod straddling a customized black Lambretta scooter as she disaffectedly regarded the gridlock.

"Do you think you can help me?" Sarah Jane asked her. "I need to get to the front of this."

"Sure thing, doll. Hop on."

Wrapping her arms around the mod's tailored men's suit and locking

hands around her waist, Sarah Jane introduced herself.

"Shelly. Shel if you like," the mod responded as the Lambretta roared to life and swerved onto the verge, what her American friends would have called the shoulder. Racing along at breakneck speed, wind blew the ends of Shel's magenta scarf into Sarah Jane's face, obscuring her vision.

It was probably a blessing in disguise. Surprised by the presence of a broken-down Morris Marina parked on the verge, its owner crouching beside the vehicle as he changed a tire, Shel had only seconds to thread her scooter into the narrow gap between the Morris and the outer lane of traffic. Able to see only bits and pieces because of the mod's scarf, the maneuver startled Sarah Jane less than it might have otherwise. But nothing blocked her ears. Once clear of the hazard, she clearly heard the Marina's owner shouting less than complimentary things behind them.

Sarah Jane had a better view when the Lambretta encountered a moving van which had pulled off the road so its crew could enjoy coffee and a quick smoke. Spotting the scooter, most of the movers flattened themselves against their vehicle to give Shel and Sarah Jane space to pass. But one, a burly man with thick stubble, flat cap, and a bully's sick grin, pantomimed that he was going to step in front of them.

Shel, apparently more than willing to accept his invitation to play chicken, swerved toward him. Jumping back, the mover lost his balance. Dropping his thermos, he crashed to the asphalt as the Lambretta sped by. His fellows jeered at him as he called Shel and Sarah Jane names that would have made the Marina's driver blush.

The next obstacle gave them no choice but to stop. A roadblock stretched across the entire M4. Beyond it, both sides of the motorway continued emptily as far as she could see. Slough police manned the barricade assisted, Sarah Jane was alarmed to see, by soldiers.

Approaching the nearest uniformed officer, she introduced herself. "Officer, I am a member of the press. What is going on here? Why has the M4 been shut down for over two hours?"

The policewoman's irritated expression changed as she examined Sarah Jane's press credentials. She glanced toward the senior soldier at the checkpoint, three dipping chevrons sewed to his uniform's shoulder. "Sir, what's the name we're looking for?"

"Sarah Jane Smith." The sergeant responded.

"This is her."

Striding authoritatively toward them, the sergeant examined her press credentials himself, "Sarah Jane Smith, come with me." As he looked Shel over, Sarah Jane intuited that his orders hadn't said anything about anyone being with her. "You too, I guess."

"Sergeant…Connor," she said reading his name plate, "We are British citizens. As you may be aware, that involves certain rights. We are going nowhere with you unless you can give me a damn good reason." Sarah Jane rarely cursed but, when she did, she meant it.

"I'm afraid that I must insist on grounds of national security."

Turning to Sarah Jane, Shel's eyes widened, "Doll, you just got a lot more

interesting."

As Sarah Jane shrugged, acquiescing that she had no real choice in the matter, the sergeant motioned them towards a jeep.

"Hey, squaddie," Shel said tersely. While the sergeant stiffened at her use of a less than complimentary slang term for solider, Shel looked back at her scooter. "That's an expensive piece of machinery that I've spent the last two years of my life customizing. You expect me to just leave it here in the hands of you lot?"

With obvious irritation, soldiers carefully loaded the Lambretta into the jeep's back. As the sergeant slid behind the wheel, Sarah Jane belted herself into the passenger's seat beside him. In the rear, Shel wedged herself in next to the scooter.

Once underway along the empty road heading in the direction of London, Sarah Jane turned toward Sergeant Connor. "As long as I'm being commandeered can you at least tell me on whose authority or what in the world they want me for?"

"I am not authorized to reveal that." Ignoring her further inquiries, Connor remained silent for rest of the drive. Eventually, Sarah Jane quit asking, focusing instead on the oddity of a vacant M4. Then, she gasped…

A dome of shimmering energy covered not only the motorway but everything in each direction to the horizon. It looked as though all of London must be beneath the glittering anomaly. Sarah Jane had encountered such bizarre phenomena traveling with the Doctor. But, here, on Earth, it felt wrong. A transgressive intrusion of the exceptional into the routine of her daily life.

Only after a moment did she notice another barricade about 150 meters in front of the energy dome. The British Army, not local police, manned this checkpoint. Two massive armored personal carriers, their cannons trained toward the barrier, flanked each side of the roadblock. Parked next to one of them was a jeep bearing the UNIT insignia.

Sergeant Connor escorted Sarah Jane and Shel toward the jeep and to a figure Sarah Jane knew well.

"Sarah Jane Smith." Sergeant John Benton grinned. "It's good to see a friendly face in the middle of all this. We hoped you'd turn up soon."

"Nice to see you too, John. But what in the world is happening?"

"Officially, I'm not at liberty to say. And, truth is, I don't really know. I can tell you that some bloody strange things are happening on the other side of…whatever that is. The Doctor and the Brigadier? They might know. They're waiting for you at Base 5. You're supposed to get there as quickly as possible."

Behind them, one of the soldiers called out, "Look lively, lads. Something's coming through again!"

Turning, Sarah Jane watched concentric ripples run across the energy barrier like surface tension on a pond. An instant later, a creature flew out of it. Since meeting the Doctor, Sarah Jane had seen many of the universe's marvels.

For sheet wonderment, none of them exceeded an honest to goodness dragon.

As soldiers hit the deck, Sergeant Benton took cover behind the jeep and pulled Shel down beside him. Taking a knee, Sarah Jane removed her camera

from its case and began shooting.

By its poise and movement, the creature was as much feline as saurian. Save for leathery bat-like wings beating powerfully through the air, green scales covered its body from the predatory head at the end of its serpentine neck to the tip of its muscular tail. The dragon's expression was clever and cunning if not precisely intelligent. Slowing its flight, the creature appeared surprised, as if finding itself in a strange environment.

Sarah Jane felt a pang of regret as, upon orders from their commanding officer, the soldiers opened fire on the beast. But if their weapons injured the dragon, it gave no sign of it. A ferocious roar, however, showed they'd antagonized the creature. Executing a graceful loop as it flew over the soldiers' positions, on its downward arc the dragon roared, spread its jaws, and spat forth a column of red-orange flame.

Already lying prone, none of the soldiers seemed seriously hurt. After the creature passed, they resumed firing. Apparently finding its circumstances more irritating than was worthwhile, the dragon roared again before executing a wingover turn that would have been the envy of any World War One flying ace and racing back through the barrier.

"All clear…for now," Benton called once it was clear the monster would not be returning for a second pass.

"Dragons?" Sarah Jane asked the Sergeant.

"And that's not even been the worst of it. I think you'd better get to Base 5, Miss Smith."

"But my motor is miles back there. And anyway, it's stuck in the middle of this. It will take hours just to get it out."

"Don't you worry. We've got a Wessex on standby that will have you there in two hours."

Minutes later, the dual-rotor transport helicopter touched down at the barricade. As Sergeant Benton motioned her toward the chopper, Sarah Jane looked at Shel. "What's going to happen to her?" she shouted to Benton over the noise from the Wessex's turbines.

"Nothing bad, if that's what you mean," the sergeant replied. "But we're going to have a long debriefing."

"I'm sorry," Sarah Jane apologized to the young mod. "I seem to have landed you in hot water."

"No problem, doll," Shel shrugged, lighting a cigarette as the wind from the Wessex's rotors tussled her short blonde hair. "Dragons? Could have been worse. Rockers? Now, *they* would have been bad news."

CHAPTER THREE

Even through earplugs, the helicopter's whining engine assaulted Sarah Jane's ears. The vista of picturesque Welsh mountains sprawling beneath her almost made up for it. At better than 200 kilometers an hour, the Wessex closed in on the crown jewel of them all.

The one visible hint that Snowden, Wales' highest peak, might be more than she appeared came from the handful of strange-looking antenna at the summit, ostensibly for meteorological reporting.

Only from a single approach, off limits to civilians and even most military and government personnel, could

one observe a large heliport and a runway long enough to handle most of the world's aircraft as well as the Americans' spaceplane which did not, officially, exist.

Ambitious climbers occasionally encountered narrow shafts leading into the mountain at Snowden's least accessible points and wondered at the warm air pouring from them, keeping the immediate area clear of snow year round. For that reason, UNIT kept geologists on its payroll to make noises about "residual volcanism" and dismiss more persistent questioners as cranks.

Put all those facts together and you might begin suspecting Snowden was, in fact, the world's largest and most advanced secret base. Hollowed out and fortified, UNIT had proofed the clandestine facility against every calamity the average person could image…as well as several ones they couldn't. Offices in Geneva and London might be the organization's brain. But Base 5, known to the world as Snowden, was where UNIT's guts were. Where things really happened.

By the time the Wessex touched down on the heliport, a UNIT corporal awaited Sarah Jane in a jeep parked alongside the tarmac. He drove her the short distance to the instillation's main entrance, passing through seven sequential blast doors before reaching Base 5 proper.

"They're waiting for you in the XCR," the corporal said as he parked the jeep. "You know the way from here, Ma'am?"

"Level 42," Sarah Jane nodded, affixing her UNIT badge to her blouse. With that, she stepped out of the jeep and into Base 5's hallways. Though predominantly British, UNIT's ranks included nationals from almost every county in the world. A handful came from places beyond that. As always, its ground floor buzzed with activity. Military personnel, technicians, scientists, and other civilian experts rushed purposely to and fro safeguarding Earth from dangers both extraterrestrial and paranormal. Considering what she'd seen on the M4, the organization's reputation was on line.

She shouldered her way through the crowd to the lifts. Only one of them serviced Level 42. Holding her badge in front of the electronic eye to its side, the doors parted. Inside, a bored-looking sergeant visually authenticated her credentials before they began their slow descent.

The lift doors opened into a hallway which, contrasting with Base 5's ground floor, was nearly vacant. The few people permitted on Level 42 were either UNIT elite or connected with the persistent hum permeating the level's corridors. The droning noise came from a vast room housing the world's most sophisticated supercomputer. That was the purpose of the shafts leading to Snowden's surface, necessary to vent heat from the massive electronic beast capable of storing an incredible one gigabyte of data.

Passing the computer room's tiny windows, Sarah Jane observed some of the dozens of technicians, experts, and statisticians needed to keep the machine running. Further down the hallway were the offices of UNIT's highest ranking military and civilian personnel.

Sarah Jane was part of the select cadre of UNIT personnel and consultants whose badge granted access to the

XCR, eXecutive Conference Room. She waved her ID under the electronic eye. As its automatic door swung open she found several people inside awaiting her arrival.

At the head of an ultra-chic conference table, Brigadier General Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart sat in a comfortable Edwardian chair. Despite heading UNIT, somehow he had never been able to reign-in its purchasing department's fondness for the sleek, modern furnishings that he despised. So he had brought his own chair, a handsome leather and teak item that had belonged to his father, the first General Lethbridge-Stewart.

Next to him, chair pulled away from the table as if marking himself apart from the others, was the Doctor. An expression of childlike-glee filled his face as he tinkered with the sonic screwdriver.

Four other faces filled out the conference table. She recognized Captain Mike Yates and Lieutenant Harry Sullivan. But the other two were unknown. The serious-looking woman in her mid-30s wore a UNIT colonel's uniform. The gray-goateed man clutching a clipboard to his white lab coat reminded Sarah Jane of a flustered chicken.

"Ah, Miss Smith, you're here," the Brigadier proclaimed. "That means," he said, casting an aggrieved glance at the Doctor, "we can finally begin. Why don't you take a seat?"

Occupying an empty chair near the Doctor, Sarah Jane reflected that this wasn't even Base 5's terminal level. The elevator ran another 50 meters beneath them to a flooded tunnel UNIT personnel informally referred to as Level 99. An engineering wonder that the world would never know about, the tunnel ran 16 kilometers to the sea and was large enough to accommodate a mini-sub, with plans underway to enlarge it to handle full-sized versions.

Observing UNIT protocol, the Brigadier introduced the unfamiliar presences to her as Colonel Mathilda Lovelace, seconded from MI6, and Dr. Henry Hadley of UNIT's science section. In turn, he presented Sarah Jane Smith as "A journalist, a colleague of the Doctor's, and an invaluable civilian consultant to UNIT. Not necessarily in that order.

"Miss Smith, I have it on Sergeant Benton's authority that you have some personal familiarity with the situation in London," Lethbridge-Stewart acknowledged. "With that in mind, Dr. Hadley, why don't we go ahead with your report?"

Standing, the chicken-man walked to the conference room's blackboard. Filling the board with complicated equations, he began speaking. Sarah Jane knew she was smart—knew she was, in fact, sharp as a tack. But she was a journalist, not a physicist. Her head swam under the onslaught of esoteric concepts.

Glancing around the room, she was not the only one reacting adversely to Dr. Hadley's presentation. The Brigadier wore a pained expression. Colonel Lovelace repeatedly glanced at her watch. Yates' wooden posture suggested an attentiveness that was forced rather than sincere. And poor Harry Sullivan look more befuddled than she was.

The Doctor, on the other hand, radiated irritation. "Yes, thank you," he eventually cut Dr. Hadley off. "What

the doctor, the other doctor I mean, is trying to say…" He turned to Sarah Jane. "Do you remember the two of us discussing how time and space are actually a single ball of wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey stuff?"

Sarah Jane nodded. She recalled the conversation, but with less than perfect clarity. After all, they'd been running from an enraged Sontaran at the time.

"Well, for reasons I don't yet understand," the Doctor began, "for reasons *we* don't yet understand," he added, bringing Dr. Hadley back into the conversation "the wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey surrounding London has become much more wibbly-wobbly. It has, in fact, become dangerously unstable.

"Setting the equations aside, what you need to understand is that for any given time and place, there are a nearly infinite number of possible versions of it stacked on top of each other. So, in addition to your London, there's one where the city didn't burn in 1666, one where you lost the last big planetary war, one where fashionable young people still dance the *canarie* and *gavotte* on Saturday night, and so on. Normally, only the most likely of those possible Londons, which happens to be yours, finds expression in our space-time. It's like looking directly down onto a stack of children's blocks. You can only see the top block. But, if you could look at it from the side, they're all there.

"Whether because the probabilities are changing or because the physics itself has, your city has begun rapidly swinging between different possible versions of itself. Your encounter with the dragon is just one example of the possible consequences from such swings. And hardly the worst one," the Doctor concluded.

"Indeed," Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart confirmed, "Captain Yates is in charge of the cordon around London. He's already amassed quite a few harrowing encounters. Captain?"

"Yes, sir," Yates acknowledged. "On an operational level, the cordon is preventing general contamination of the UK from these alternate Londons. Still, at the tactical level, there have been incidents. Had it gone differently, the dragon could have been one of the worst. But since the swings began, UNIT, with a lot of help from the British Army, has dealt with dinosaurs, mastodons, big cats, hell hounds, and giant snakes. Even something we think was a Jabberwock. It destroyed a pub, a playground, a dozen civilian vehicles, and a Challenger tank before one of the Scots Guards decapitated it with his bayonet. Still, I'd rather be dealing with that than what Lieutenant Sullivan's been up to."

"Not everything that's come through has been a monster or animal," Sullivan began, slightly awkward with the spotlight on him. "We've apprehended cavemen, Vikings, blackshirts, pirates, and Templars from a London where what the inquisition said about them was, well, true. And we're having to find places to hold them…without civilian law enforcement asking too many questions."

"Do you realize," the Brigadier chimed in, looking at Sarah Jane and the Doctor, "at this very moment, I have Gurkhas chasing Mole People through the sewers of Bromley?"

After pausing to sip his tea, Lethbridge-Stewart continued. "And there

are secondary consequences of these swings which may be as challenging and dangerous as the phenomenon itself."

"Such as?" Sarah Jane inquired.

"Has it occurred to you," the Brigadier replied, "that nearly the entirety of British leadership is behind that barrier? It is no small thing to keep the entire country from noticing that its government has gone missing. I feel like I might as well be prime minister myself. Of course, that pales in comparison to the worst-case scenarios for Colonel Lovelace's operation: trying to keep the Americans, and everybody else, in the dark about what's going on…without looking like we're keeping them in the dark."

"Why should that matter?" Sarah Jane asked, not immediately sensing a clear connection.

"The Americans would see the Soviets behind this," the colonel's perfect mid-Atlantic accent testified to her acquaintance with the countries on both sides of the pond. "Despite the Kremlin having no idea what's going on, or perhaps especially *because* they don't, that doesn't lead anywhere good. If nukes end up flying, then managing to contain or halt these…occurrences…would all be for naught."

"And our time is limited," Dr. Hadley said, placing his hands on his hips. Reminiscent of wings, it did nothing to diminish the chicken comparison. Despite the serious matter at hand, Sarah Jane dropped her face to hide a grin. "The math," Hadley continued, "indicates that the swings are accelerating. And heading toward an existential event horizon."

The Doctor nodded. "Both Dr. Hadley and I have prepared forecasts for the phenomenon. Our results agree that, left unchecked, acceleration leads to calamity of a kind seldom seen in your galaxy. Depending on quantum events that, by definition are difficult to predict, this ends one of two ways. Either it fixes an alternate London in our space-time…with unpredictable consequences. Imagine beasts like the one you saw today spreading to all seven continents. Or it concludes with a probability collapse that destroys *all* possible Londons. And," the Doctor's afterthought came as an uncomfortable whisper, "everybody in them."

"But the Doctor has a plan," Sullivan proclaimed, his face broadcasting an almost canine trust.

The Brigadier, however, didn't look quite so certain.

"Yes," the Doctor acknowledged, looking with particular attention at Sarah Jane. "I need to travel into the disturbance itself and take readings from various Londons. Just like physical surveying, it's a two person job. I will need an assistant to accompany me."

"Using those readings," Dr. Hadley continued, "The Doctor and I believe the origin of the disturbance can be triangulated and traveled to."

"Of course, Dr. Hadley says 'triangulation' because that's the colloquial term," the Doctor added. "Though, properly, what we will actually be doing is *undecalation*. It requires readings from eleven different locations to pinpoint a single location in eleven dimensional space-time."

"Of course." Hadley frowned.

"After reaching the disturbance's source, I have a solid plan for dealing with it," the Doctor announced confi-

dently.

"The first I've heard of it," Lethbridge-Stewart said. "What is it?"

"Make it up as I go along. The same as always." The Time Lord smiled.

The Brigadier looked positively dyspeptic.

"Okay, all that makes sense," Sarah Jane acknowledged. "But, from what you say, the clock is counting down on London. My London, anyway. Why haven't you gone already?"

"We were waiting for you, Miss Smith." Sullivan said.

"Me?"

"The Doctor insisted on it." The Brigadier sounded less than pleased. "Both Captain Yates and Lieutenant Sullivan volunteered. But the Doctor would hear of no one but you accompanying him."

Sarah Jane hoped she wasn't blushing. But she was beyond touched by the sentiment, she was thrilled. "Thank you, Doctor. Thank you for the vote of confidence." Sarah Jane never doubted her worth measured against any person born on Earth. But against a superintelligent alien who was effectively immortal? It was sometimes difficult not to feel inadequate.

"I do have enormous confidence in you, Sarah. You know that. But this goes beyond that. Although no math backs it up, I suspect you're the only one who can help me this time.

"Your London is the 'real' one because choices by billions of people over dozens of generations have made it the most probable London, not because it is somehow more fundamentally valid than the others. When a swing occurs, whatever London people find themselves inhabiting will seem as natural and proper to them as yours is to you.

"But you *may* be an exception. It is my hope that our travels together have inoculated you with a sort of reality inertia that will protect you against the kind of space-time relativism these swings normally cause. Maybe you'll be completely immune. Maybe only partly. Either way, you're the only one I can trust to assist me."

"Well," Sarah Jane said. "When do we leave?"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Tower of London receded behind them as they walked into the alternate London. It had been Sarah Jane's idea to park the TARDIS there. As the Doctor explained before departing Base 5 to journey inside the disturbance, "the old girl" would be useful for entering the zone of unstable space-time and, after they'd obtained the necessary coordinates, traveling to its source. Once within the instability, however, they couldn't rely on being near the TARDIS when a swing occurred.

The Tower of London's White Tower, raised by the Normans sometime during the 1080s, was her London's oldest surviving structure. Therefore, Sarah Jane had reasoned, it was the one most likely to also exist in alternate versions of the city, giving them a landmark by which to locate the TARDIS among changing cityscapes.

The Doctor had one smile meaning "That's impressive, for a human" and another meaning "That's impressive, period." When he greeted her suggestion about the Tower with that second expression, Sarah Jane glowed.

"What now, Doctor?" she asked, holding the metal rod he'd handed her. "Can we take our readings anywhere or does it need to be someplace special?"

"Well, it needs to be somewhere spacious. Proximity to too much matter can throw off the readings. So, either out of doors or inside a large room," he replied, arms wrapped around a case the size of a hatbox. After a moment he added, "And fairly private, I suppose. We don't want overcurious locals asking questions we don't care to answer."

As they walked, she asked about something which puzzled her. "When I was on the M4, the disturbance looked like a big, shining hemisphere of energy. We couldn't even see the dragon before it came through. But nothing in here looks like that."

"No, it wouldn't," the Doctor replied before explaining. "That phenomenon is a very particular form of energy discharge that occurs where a zone of unstable space-time comes into contact with a stable one. It's really not so different from the rain you get when a warm front and cold front bang up against each other."

Eventually, Sarah Jane began wondering if the Doctor been right about the alternate Londons. She couldn't see any clear differences between the streets of her city and the ones they now walked while searching for a place such as the Doctor described to take their readings. Certainly there were no dragons here. Nor any Vikings, Jabberwocks, or the other hazards Yates and Sullivan mentioned.

Then a psychedelic Jaguar convertible nearly ran them over as it squealed into a turn onto Carnaby Street. Wind tussled the driver's shaggy blonde hair—a young man wearing a plum-colored overcoat, lime green ascot, and oversized sunglasses. Crammed in around him, and on the car's sides and boot, were a half-dozen girls in tight-fitting and brilliantly colored clothes.

"Sorry, luvs!" one of the girls, in a Union Jack dress and using one hand to hold her floppy white sunhat in place, called out to Sarah Jane and the Doctor with a friendly wave as the Jaguar roared away.

The incident caused Sarah Jane to regard her surroundings with new eyes. Exuberant young people packed London's shopping streets and cafes while energetic, upbeat music blared from every open door and raised window.

Girls' high boots stretched almost to their colorful miniskirts and short-hemmed dresses. Hair, either short or very long, was straight. Garish purses, bangles, and costume jewelry accented their looks. Their guys favored stovepipe trousers, velvet pants, ascots, and paisley shirts often covered by jackets with prominent lapels sprouting from beneath meticulously unkempt hair. Circle-lensed sunglasses appeared embraced by everyone.

No, things here weren't quite the same. Unlike her London, its exuberance tempered by nascent recession, this city still swung. Indeed, here "Swinging London" had expanded beyond the affluent, youthful demographic that spawned it. More than a few housewives in bright polka dot miniskirts pushed babies in matching prams. So too, had many middle-aged men traded bowler hats for stevedore caps and exchanged conservative ties for wide, floral print versions. Grand-

fathers who might have survived the Somme went about clad in lurid paisley.

Sarah Jane didn't relish the prospect of this London. Even at school, always earnest and studious, her peers had regarded her as something of a wet blanket. Those fears proved well founded. The looks elicited by her sensible blouse and earth-tone pants confirmed that, here too, she looked a bit of a drag.

The Doctor, on the other hand, was delighted. And this London responded in kind. People nodded approvingly and even gave him the high-five as they passed. Perplexing him the first time it occurred, he quickly warmed to the gesture. These Londoners saw the Doctor's eccentric manner and outlandish attire as signs that the old fellow was "with it."

As they walked along Carnaby, Sarah Jane remarking that every other car on the street seemed to be a conspicuously-painted Mini, a young man introducing himself as Brian asked to photograph the Doctor. Sarah Jane smirked as he hammed it up for the photographer on a Soho street corner. As much as her friend often implicitly held himself above humans, at times he displayed an almost fawning desire for their acceptance. Really, it was all a bit much.

"Doctor, we've got a job to do," Sarah Jane reminded him.

"A physician?" Brian said as his shutter continued to click, "I'm not surprised. A man of taste. Where do you practice?"

"Oh, here and there," he replied, eyes twinkling as he looked at Sarah Jane. "But you're right, my dear, we want to get this done before the next…"

"Swing?" She volunteered, giggling that the era's self-ascribed moniker afforded them a perfect cover for openly discussing their activities.

"Well, yes," the Doctor replied.

"You're looking for someplace that swings?" Brian asked, misunderstanding their meaning. "I don't know what you've got going on, but I was headed to the club for a tipple. Care to join?"

Sarah Jane saw the look in the Doctor's eyes. "We need someplace isolated, remember?" she chided.

She followed his eyes to Brian and then to the extravagantly-attired, energetic youth all around. "A place where no one will care is as good as one where no one can see." He grinned before turning to the photographer. "This club of yours, is it roomy?"

"Yeah, sure, I guess," he replied while stowing his camera.

The Colony Room turned out to be one of those private, members-only clubs catering to Swinging London's cultural aristocracy. Whoever Brian was, his presence proved sufficient to secure admittance for Sarah Jane and the Doctor.

The daytime crowd reposed on an eclectic mix of barstools, benches, and tables as they drank and smoked. In one corner, a pianist belted the words to "Honkey Cat" while banging out good-times rock and roll on a rhinestone-studded baby-grand the color of red lipstick. He flubbed a chord on the ivories while enviously eyeing the Doctor's wardrobe.

The Doctor surveyed the venue. "I think this will do, Sarah," he proclaimed while opening the case he carried. From its interior he removed a

dodecahedron-shaped contraption made from some pearlescent metal Sarah Jane couldn't identify. Nor, she suspected, could any scientist born on Earth. Polychrome crystals were set into eleven of the dodecahedron's facets. The twelfth held a thumb-sized socket into which the Doctor inserted the metal rod.

"Hold this, Sarah. Straight and steady," he asked, handing her the joined rod and dodecahedron.

"Ready, Doctor?" she asked, doing as he had instructed her.

"Just a tic, I need my sonic screwdriver," he replied. Fishing his favorite tool from one of the coat's pockets, the Doctor began circling her with the screwdriver in hand.

After a few moments, one of the polychrome crystals on the object she held lit up. Then another. And another. The process elicited interested glances from many of the Colony Room's patrons but, as the Doctor had predicted, no questions and no interference. A few minutes later, when all eleven crystals were illuminated, the Doctor nodded to her. "That's one reading. Now we just need ten more."

"That's all?" indignation filled Sarah Jane's voice. "You brought me along just so I could hold this…whatever it is? I thought I'd be helping you save the world."

"Yes, that's all. And it's just an eleven-dimensional quantum compass. Oh, I admit this one has a few more bells and whistles than your basic model. But I told you what we'd be doing was basically surveying. And you *are* helping me save the world. It had to be you. I couldn't take the risk of bringing someone along who might 'go native' because of space-time relativism."

After they had removed the rod from its socket and returned the eleven-dimensional quantum compass to its case, Brian the photographer approached again, holding three potent-looking orange cocktails in his hands.

"Far out, man. You didn't tell me you were performance artists," he said, "I dig it. Very avant-garde. Very Bruce Lacey." He handed each of them a drink. "I heard the Doctor saying something about wanting a sonic screwdriver. Ian doesn't know that cocktail, so I had him whip up three regular screwdrivers."

Not wishing to appear rude but highly amused by the misunderstanding, Sarah Jane laughed into her hand.

"Would you two like to join me at my table?" Brian asked.

Uncertain how to respond, Sarah Jane looked at the Doctor.

"We might as well enjoy ourselves here and await the next swing," smiling, he too appreciated the double-meaning allowing them to use the term openly in this London.

She was glad to find Brian's table far from the Kray Twins. The notorious gangsters were, improbably, also darlings of Swinging London's fashionable set. Experiencing a moment of cognitive dissonance, Sarah Jane would have sworn the Krays were in prison.

Setting her drink down on the table and catching sight of her blouse and slacks, Sarah Jane wondered why she'd chosen the dowdy outfit. The thought was alien, but it was there just the same. Looking enviously at the other patrons' ensembles, she mentally inventoried the crowd. Early in her career, Sarah Jane had covered the

Kray Twins' various exploits and numerous trails. So it came as no surprise she knew their faces. She was less certain how she not only recognized but recalled personal details about other patrons like pirate radio impresario Ronan O'Rahilly, editor Diana Vreeland, and novelist Colin MacInnes.

"Doctor, about that space-time relativism…"

Sarah Jane remembered she'd come into the Colony Room with the Doctor, her closest friend and companion. But couldn't remember *how* she knew him. She thought she recalled him saying something about being a physician. Of the dim notion they'd come in here on some important errand, she could make nothing.

As the club's lights dimmed and darkness descended, Sarah Jane thought that Brian's cocktail was hitting awfully hard…

CHAPTER FIVE

Sarah Jane watched Arthur crouching at the edge of one of the oxbow lakes dotting the marshy Thames valley. His multitude of legs flattened into the dark mud while sunlight glinted off his black carapace. Just inches from the water, Sarah Jane's horseshoe crab companion chirped expectantly.

Close by, she concealed herself behind one of the not-quite-quince bushes, holding a sizable oblong stone and waiting. Since her memory had, mostly, returned to her, Sarah Jane forced herself to mentally replay the entire sequence of events several times each day. Hopefully that would keep her recollection intact.

After the first swing occurred, Sarah Jane found herself removed from Swinging London and deposited in a city *with* French rockets raining down on it…but *without* the Doctor. Nor had he been in the one with Prime Minister Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart. Now, in a world where mammals never evolved, to say nothing of humans, her only friend was the horseshoe crab thing which had taken a curious liking to her. And vice-versa. Somehow, in the chaotic eddies of the wibbley-wobbly timey-wimey, Sarah Jane and the Doctor had been separated.

Would the Doctor's "critical event" eventually destroy her along with the cities of countless alternate worlds? Or would she grow old and die living through an endless series of ever-changing Londons? But Sarah Jane wasn't so certain they were still changing. The swings seemed to have stopped. How long had she been in this wild and bizarre world? Long enough to name her horseshoe crab companion "Arthur." Long enough, even, to find her forced pun on "*arthro*pod" hilarious.

Ahead of her, there was movement in the water. Quickly, Arthur scuttled into the shallows. Leaving the shelter of the bush, Sarah Jane rushed toward the waterline. Grabbing the giant eel with his forelegs, Arthur dragged the thrashing creature ashore where Sarah Jane brained it with her oblong stone until it quite moving.

Watching Arthur, she'd learned the oxbows' inhabitants were edible. The horseshoe crab seemingly considered them quite a delicacy. Sarah Jane supposed she should have felt more trepidation about trying new foods here but, after so long eating nothing but not-quite-quince, she'd jumped at the opportunity.

Arthur hunted the giant eels by

dragging them onto land until they suffocated in the air. Unfortunately, they usually wriggled free and escaped into the water. There was no way Sarah Jane could have hauled the heavy, slippery things out on her own. But, with opposable thumbs and a good rock, she could quickly dispatch one. She and her unlikely friend made good partners. With Arthur holding and Sarah Jane bashing, their success rate was far higher than what either of them could have achieved alone.

She draped the giant eel over Arthur's shell for the walk back to their rock. Sarah Jane had a memory of her biology lecturer saying arthropods possessed enormous strength proportional to their size. Certainly, her companion seemed untroubled serving as a beast of burden.

Sarah Jane's grandfather had loved three things: his wife, the footy, and fishing. Not, it should be thought, in that order. As a girl, she'd dreaded summer holidays with him that invariably became prolonged angling trips. Now, she was glad of them. Back at the rock, using the sharpened bit of ceramic pipe she'd picked up in the London of the Anglo-French War, she cleaned and gutted the eel. Depositing the offal in front of Arthur, who consumed it happily, Sarah Jane kept the filets for herself. Though tough and rubbery, the flavor was as good as any sashimi she'd had.

Sarah Jane ran an affectionate hand along Arthur's carapace, "If I really am stuck here, I suppose we'll just open a sushi restaurant."

As Arthur watched with what she supposed was interest, Sarah Jane worked on the two projects which filled her copious free time, fashioning a stone spear tip and making fire. She had little to show toward the first. That wasn't a surprise. Sarah Jane knew there was more to making stone tools than banging two rocks together. But what was it? For all she knew, they weren't even the right kind of rocks. Though Sarah Jane wouldn't have admitted it to anyone, even had there been someone to admit it to, it was more than hope of having a spear that kept her going. Banging rocks together until they shattered helped relieve the stress of being a castaway in London: Population 1.

On the second project, she'd made progress. Though it had been two decades since the Girl Guides, Sarah Jane retained hazy memories of using a stick and bow to make fire. She already took satisfaction in having twisted the fibers of a sisal-like plant into serviceable twine for her bow. And though her goal remained unachieved, each time she came a little closer. Today, she even noticed a burning smell and spotted a tiny wisp of smoke. Regrettably, that was the moment her hands and fingers began cramping, crying out that they were done. Frustrated, Sarah Jane went back to smashing rocks.

Exhausted and with the sun sinking below the horizon, Sarah Jane settled down into her nest. She was still sleeping too much, but not so often as when she'd first arrived in this world. Arthur snuggled next to her. Sarah Jane was grateful she'd found him but, in one way, he was inferior to a dog or cat. The ectothermic Arthur gave no warmth.

About to drift off to sleep, Sarah Jane's eyes popped open as her body screamed alarm. A face peered over

the boulder's edge. At least she hoped there was face beneath the cowl of the interloper's dark robe. Among the parade of memories which had flooded back to her, Sarah Jane had almost forgotten the unnerving being who'd stalked her through two previous Londons. Up close, he proved even more disturbing for a curious familiarity in posture and movement, albeit one Sarah Jane couldn't place. As Arthur clicked in confusion while looking back and forth between Sarah Jane and the strange new biped, Sarah Jane dove for her ceramic shard.

As Sarah Jane brandished the weapon, the figure's ghostly white hands reached for its cowl. Then black oblivion rolled over the world.

Seeing people, other people, walking wide paved streets flanked by tall buildings, Sarah Jane's heart nearly burst with joy. She wanted to hug them all. That, of course, might lead to questions she preferred not to answer. Her enthusiasm at being reunited with humanity was interrupted as something bumped her leg. A new rush of delight came at finding Arthur looking up her, clicking curiously and obviously confused by his surroundings.

It wasn't until a nearby child, dressed in a twee sailor's uniform and holding an outsized lolly, shouted "Look, mum, a monster!" while pointing at the horseshoe crab that it occurred to Sarah Jane having her companion along for the ride came with complications.

"Andrew!" his mother scolded. "What a terrible thing to say!" Fortunately, in the moment before she turned her attention to Sarah Jane and began apologizing profusely, a gentle kick persuaded Arthur to skitter behind a skip bin. The massive rubbish container hid the strange, to this London anyway, visitor from view.

After the mother and child moved along, Sarah Jane faced an unpleasant choice. Since they'd left the TARDIS at the Tower of London, it seemed the most promising place to look for the Doctor as well. But there was no way Arthur could accompany her to the Tower without hundreds, even thousands, of people witnessing her companion. Still, she didn't want to travel too far from Arthur. She had no idea if distance would influence whether he traveled with her to the next London. But the idea of him stranded here without her, an oddity fit only for the zoo or, worse, the dissection table, made her nauseous.

She figured it should take no more than an hour, maybe two, to look for the Doctor and, one way or the other, return. She had yet to encounter a London which swung to the next alternate that quickly. And the skip bin didn't appear to have been emptied in a very long time. Sarah Jane figured it would remain that way at least a few hours longer. So Arthur could remain there, safely concealed. "STAY!" She emphasized to Arthur, adding under her breath as she walked away, "Please, stay."

Sarah Jane found no sign of the Doctor either outside the heavy patrolled Tower complex or in the seedy streets beyond. By the time she returned, Sarah Jane had acquired a hearty dislike of this London where, as she pieced it together, an impoverished and militarized Britain still clung to empire even as its capital city suffered under a multiyear transit and sanitation

strike.

Arthur, having nested in overflowing trash behind the bin, chirped happily at Sarah Jane's return. Lingering by the rancid-smelling receptacle, awaiting the next swing, she drew plenty of curious glances but none of the locals interfered.

When the next swing occurred, Sarah Jane's new companion was by her side. "Well, I'm glad to know you and I can't shake each other that easily," she said, stroking Arthur's shell. "I do wonder how the Doctor and I got separated, though."

They settled into a pattern. Swinging into a new London, Sarah Jane immediately found someplace to conceal Arthur. That proved easier than expected. True, in a city, people were everywhere. But so were at least as many places to hide.

After putting the horseshoe crab somewhere people wouldn't casually stumble upon him, Sarah Jane rushed to the Tower. Or whatever occupied that space in her current alternate. Never finding the Doctor, she returned to Arthur and the two of them awaited the next swing.

So it went for dozens of Londons. Though most of them blurred together, a few stood out. Sarah Jane regretted not being able to enjoy a quiet respite in the sleepy little market town of London, part of a United Kingdom where Scotland had bested England and all roads led to Edinburgh. She had been in the stands at Highbury to watch Middlesboro take the FA Cup, retiring Arsenal 1-0. And she marveled at the improbability of a London where, 500 years after the House of Lancaster extinguished the House of York during the War of the Roses, other than the names in the news and the faces on the money, everything else remained the same.

Still with no sign of her Time Lord friend, a swing carried Sarah Jane and Arthur to the nighttime streets of some working class neighborhood. Warm, yellow electric lights cut the darkness as they shone from round globes atop filigreed iron posts. Despite the hour, the street was hardly deserted. Before anyone spotted them, Sarah Jane led the horseshoe crab into a darkened alley.

It perplexed her that it was daytime in some Londons but night in others. Infinitesimal variations in Earth's rotation adding up over billions of years was all she could think of by way of an explanation. Perhaps soured by her experience in the London of the Anglo-French War, the nighttime Londons always struck her as ominous.

Standing at the alley's edge, surveying the street, she got a read on this London. Strolling men wore top hats and long coats falling to their knees. Women, seldom unaccompanied, made their way along in hoopskirts and corsets. The traffic was especially striking. Some older people Sarah Jane knew still called automobiles "motor coaches" and "horseless carriages." Here, vehicles remained worthy of those names. Though their performance matched the cars of her London, their styling evoked broughams, buggies, hackneys, and landaus rather than her world's coups, sedans, and lorries.

This city, Sarah Jane deduced, was the antithesis of the avant-garde Swinging London she and the Doctor

visited. Here, whomever warmed the throne, it was Victoria's forms and fashions that still held sway. Lost in those considerations, too late to react, she noticed a pair of approaching constables. By the time she ducked back into the alley, she was certain they'd spotted her.

Receding into shadowy concealment, Sarah Jane hoped for the best as the roundsmen lingered just outside the alley. Silhouetted against a streetlamp, with their long coats and high, bell-shaped helmets, they looked like something from a Sherlock Holmes story. "We see you down there, doxy dear," one of them called. "This here's a respectable neighborhood. Move along and there'll be no fuss. Make a row and you'll do a fortnight at Newgate for pandering."

Trying not to appear suspicious and, above all, wanting to keep as much distance between the officers and Arthur as possible, Sarah Jane walked forward into the light.

"Well now, Bert, look at those clothes," one of them remarked. "She's no streetwalker. She's showfolk, she is!"

"If you say so, Harry," Bert answered. "The Missus loves the theatre. But it doesn't do for me." Both men wore blue metal helmets affixed with Metropolitan Police insignias. Brass buttons, numbering a score or more, trailed down their long navy-colored coats. The taller of the two, the one called Harry, wore a red carnation threaded through one buttonhole.

"Showfolk for certain," Harry said, turning to Sarah Jane and addressing her with, "Bona nocked, dolly ecaf."

Sarah Jane didn't understand the words but in a Victorian world, if the constable thought she was from the theatre, it was probably some form of Polari. His smile said, whatever it was, he'd meant it kindly. Returning the smile, Sarah Jane tossed in a theatrical curtsey. Her response seemed to satisfy Harry, who looked at Bert as if to say, "See?"

"Very well, Miss," the other constable acknowledged. "Sorry for the trouble."

Sarah Jane's blood ran cold as rustling and scurrying noises came from the dark corners of the alley.

"Hold a moment, what's all that?" Bert asked and went to investigate. Arthur, apparently having sensed the interaction between Sarah Jane and the constables turn pleasant, decided it was safe to emerge from the shadows. Not believing her eyes, Sarah Jane watched Bert lean over Arthur and pet him twice on his shell. Rising, he smiled at Sarah Jane "That's a fine…whatever he is…you've got there, Miss."

Without further comment, the roundsmen bid Sarah Jane a good evening, doffed their helmets, and continued their patrol. At the edge of the alley, Bert halted and turned around. "Do take care, Miss. You're a long way from West End, you are. Lots of Dissenters and Chapel folk in these parts who might not be happy to see you."

Though she was uncertain how long her interaction with the officers had lasted, it was enough that Sarah Jane worried whether she could get to the Tower and return before the next swing. Especially if, as seemed likely, this was a world were an oddly-dressed female traveling alone would draw attention. Instead, she settled in

beside Arthur, hoping that this wouldn't be the London where the Tower complex held a certain Time Lord.

Hearing noise from the street, Sarah Jane feared the roundsmen had returned for some reason. The reality was far worse. The sinister cloaked figure had not only reappeared, he now had her trapped in the alley. Not having seen him since Arthur's world, Sarah Jane had dared hoped she'd shaken her strange stalker. Time had not diluted the uncanny alarm he created in Sarah Jane.

Clicking in confusion beside her, even Arthur seemed to sense something off about the man. Though it seemed unlikely, one possibility might explain the strangeness. "Doctor?" she asked skeptically.

Throwing back his hood, backlit by the streetlight, it was impossible for Sarah Jane to make out his features. But with thick, straight hair flowing to his shoulders, one thing was certain, it wasn't the Doctor.

Sarah Jane had the impression the figure was about to speak when reality swung once again.

CHAPTER SIX

Chills ran down Sarah Jane's spine each time she encountered a London without its eponymous tower. At least this time she knew to expect it.

Though her memory had remained mostly intact since Arthur's world, Sarah Jane still experienced occasional flashes of insight regarding the alternates she visited. Looking at the open public square dominated by a tall, heavily-ornamented column, she "remembered" that demolishing the Tower of London had been Phillip II's first act following the Armada's victory and successful Spanish invasion.

Speaking of Arthur, the horseshoe crab traveled openly at her side. After the constables' strange reaction, Sarah Jane risked an experiment. Something had happened between the London of lingering empire, where her pet had alarmed young Andrew, and the Victorian one. People no longer reacted to Arthur's presence. Sarah Jane didn't know what had changed, but suspected it was connected with the decaying space-time surrounding the Londons.

Making her way through the Plaza of the Two Heroes, Sarah Jane passed the ranks of paella sellers crying out their prices as they pushed their fragrant carts. True, Britain had been free for a long time, but two centuries of domination by Madrid left their imprint. Many of the plaza's sights, on the other hand, could belong almost anywhere. Old men resting tired bones on long benches tossed breadcrumbs to legions of pigeons. Beneath the column, an eclectic group of loafers played chess on small tables.

Something within the plaza, however, was absolutely singular. Indeed, unique in the universe. Seated among the chess players she spotted a familiar puff of snowy hair and the wide lapels of an old-fashioned greatcoat turned up against the cool, breezy day. Sarah Jane nearly squealed with delight. Dashing enthusiastically forward, she earned disapproving looks from a dignified procession of Carmelite nuns.

"Doctor!" she gushed profusely upon reaching him.

"Sarah," he said, raising his head to smile at her. "I am overjoyed to have found you. Who is your friend?" The Doctor asked as he took in the horse-

shoe crab's presence at her side.

Even the Doctor's convenient amnesia regarding who had, in fact, found who couldn't dampen her ebullience at the reunion. "This is Arthur. We've been together since I rescued him in a world where mammals never evolved. He is, as you would say, a very clever creature."

As the Doctor's gaze shifted from Arthur to the plaza's other occupants, Sarah Jane realized he had picked up on the salient point that no one appeared upset by the large arthropod's presence. Though frowning, he offered no additional comment except "Forgive me for not getting up, I haven't had a decent game in ages."

She knew the Doctor considered chess one of humanity's greatest accomplishments. Willing to wait out the game before commanding his full attention, Sarah Jane was startled to discover she recognized his opponent. About the same age as the Doctor, the Doctor's apparent age anyway, the man wore his thick black hair slicked back. A long, wire-thin mustache curved wildly upward while his dark eyes held the paradox of rigid self-discipline coexisting with inspired madness. "You're Salvador Dali?"

"*Dal-EE*," he corrected her pronunciation. Focused on the chessboard, he distractedly extended his hand to her "Encantado." The artist's eyes lingered a moment on Arthur before returning to game. His expression as he regarded her strange companion piqued Sarah Jane's curiosity. She might almost have called it a look of recognition.

Sarah Jane surveyed the board. While chess held no special interest for her, she knew enough to pass the time with a decent game. Though the Doctor's moves were quick, he methodically and thoroughly considered each one. He appeared to be playing his usual strategy. In the Doctor's estimation, the most gifted human chess player who ever lived was a long dead American named Paul Morphy. But he believed Morphy retired from the game before the seeds of his genius reached fruition. Among her friend's many pet projects was refining and expanding on the American grandmaster's ideas.

But Dali, who played intuitively and seemingly shifted strategy from move to move, appeared to be keeping the Doctor's game off balance.

The thrill of spectating eventually wore thin. At first wondering if a bowl of paella might be just the thing, hesitant to put too much distance between herself and the Doctor or Arthur, she instead studied the statues at the column's base. The two men from whom the Plaza of the Two Heroes took its name.

By the nineteenth century's beginning, Spain ruled over three continents; so powerful no one rebellion, however large or well organized, could succeed. The statues, standing back to back, honored the leaders of the twin rebellions which finally broke Spanish power. The short Franco-Corsican, with his peasant features and ostentatious uniform, made a striking juxtaposition with his ally and friend, whose aristocratic Anglo-Irish countenance was all the more powerful for its general air of understatement. The part of Sarah Jane still susceptible to spacetime relativism knew an identical column, and statues, rose from Paris's Place des Deux Héros.

"You are the companion the Doctor mentioned? The one who travels with him?" Dali asked Sarah Jane, pulling her from her thoughts, while he took one of the Doctor's remaining pawns from the board.

"Yes."

"Through time and space?"

"Yes," Sarah Jane stammered, glancing curiously at the Doctor.

"Don't look at me, Sarah," the Doctor explained. "Our new friend worked that out on his own." After moving a bishop, he continued. "It's like I've often told you, when properly trained the intelligent mind can achieve things which appear impossible. Miraculous, even. It seems Mr. Dali's surrealism has trained his mind to spot things, and people, from elsewhere."

"You are half right, Doctor," Dali commented, sliding his rook to displace the Doctor's bishop. "But you mistake effect for cause. It is not my painting that makes the difference…but my technique for creating art. The paranoiac-critical method. To tear down the barriers we build in art and in the self is to acknowledge that anything may come from any context. For example, I acknowledge there may be other worlds where London is not the center of art…but perhaps Paris or New York." The artist's inflection indicated those suggestions carried a trace of the absurd for him. "By internalizing that, I can spot things which come from contexts other than mine. When I saw the Doctor, and when I saw you and your pet, I knew you were not from here. You were another disturbance."

"Disturbance?"

"Yes, it seems Mr. Dali is, on some level, aware of the swings," the Doctor muttered, contemplating the contested board. "And has already noticed a variety of anomalous objects in his world."

"Yes, about that, as long as we're talking freely around Dali. Why were you and I separated after the first swing? And is that just going to happen again when we leave here?"

"I don't think so. But, yes, that puzzled me as well. When I finally figured it out, I felt like a fool for not realizing beforehand. You are from London, from the area of disturbance. I am not. When swings occur, the universe treats us differently. Like positive and negative magnetic charges. We end up different places." With one hand, the Doctor pulled away his coat and shirt, revealing a strange silver-white undergarment. "I started working on this once I realized what was happening," he explained. "If I'm right, it should cause swings to treat me like I'm a native. So, when the next one happens, we'll end up together.

"If I'm wrong…" He paused. "Just keep trying to meet up at the Tower's location and we'll figure out something else. Looking for each other here is a good idea. I'm glad you hit upon it as well."

"Something else I'm wondering about," Sarah Jane continued. "Why is Arthur coming with me on the swings? Why didn't he just stay in his world like everyone else we've met?"

"That is a very good question. One I would need time and the right instruments to answer properly. Off the cuff, I'd say some form of quantum entanglement has occurred. Perhaps your quantum signatures muddled to-

gether. I'm very glad yours appears to be dominant. Had it gone the other way, you might have been stuck with Arthur is his world.

"What perplexes me more are people's reactions to your new friend. I understand about Mr. Dali, of course. But why isn't everyone else is this square having fits about him?"

Sarah Jane relayed her encounter with the two Victorian constables. "After that, I risked taking him out in broad daylight with me. Nobody so much as said 'boo!'"

"This is bad. Very good for you and Arthur, of course. But not for everything else." The Doctor's wrinkled brow furled with concern. Before he could explain further, conversation died as the players' focus returned to the chessboard. In a series of lightning-fast moves, the Doctor upended what had been a very close match. "Checkmate!" he proclaimed after demolishing Dali's remaining defense.

The artist looked angry, even enraged, before bursting into laughter. "Well done, Doctor. I admire your spirit. You played by the book until I believed that was who you were. Until my mind refused the evidence of my eyes that you had thrown the book away. I must remember that strategy. What do you call it?"

"Let's just call it, 'The Doctor's Endgame.'"

"Mr. Dali, since you know what's going on, Sarah and I require a private place to take our readings on these disturbances. Might we make use of your studio?"

The artist's studio turned out to be a healthy walk from the plaza, in the bohemian neighborhood known as Colina Notting since the days of Spanish occupation. Ushering them into a terraced house just off Calle Portobello, which the locals pronounced *Porta-bey-o*, Dali apologized. "I regret not being able to offer you full hospitality. Gala, my wife, is visiting family in Russia." Sizing-up Sarah Jane, he added, "Perhaps that is just as well. She dislikes me bringing home pretty girls."

The opportunity to browse the studio of another world's Salvador Dali stuck Sarah Jane as more than hospitality enough. Paintings by this Dali and similar artists lined bare brick walls alongside photographs unmistakably, different world or not, the work of Man Ray. Sculptures and strange objects covered tables and shelves, including stacked soup cans of a well-known brand from Sarah Jane's world.

"Those are some of the objects I found from other contexts," Dali explained when he noticed Sarah Jane staring. "So I gathered them up and brought them here. I thought of paining them. But that seemed lazy and derivative."

The Doctor proclaimed that sufficient open space existed, barely, to take readings in the studio. As they sat up the quantum compass, Arthur entertained himself by batting at long strings of bells dangling from the arms of a mannequin whose legs had been replaced with a unicycle wheel.

"Would you restrain your insect? Duchamp gave that to me…" Dali asked before pausing. "Actually, Marcel would approve. Never mind."

As if sensing his activities questioned, Arthur skittered from the object d'art to a spot behind the Doctor's

feet. Clearly, the horseshoe crab had decided the Time Lord was, as Sarah Jane's aunt would have said, "good people." About the artist, Arthur seemed less certain, inclined to move away whenever Dali approached too closely.

While Sarah Jane held the compass and the Doctor took readings with his sonic screwdriver, she told him about her adventures since their separation. Though requesting more details about the world where she'd encountered Arthur, and how the two very different beings had cemented their friendship, it was clearly her repeated encounters with the menacing cloaked character which most grabbed his attention.

The Doctor, too, had memorable experiences to relate since their visit to Swinging London. He recounted tales of a post-Viking Scandinavian England where Cnut's descendants still ruled from their grim throne in York and of an acrid, smoke-filled dystopia still stagnating in the Industrial Revolution's early stages. And, just as Sarah had her anomalously long residence in Arthur's world, the Doctor experienced a prolonged stay in an idyllic, feudal England where chivalrous knights tilted at giants in dark, fairytale forests.

Throughout their conversation, Dali sat in silent contemplation. "Perhaps you can stop this thing," he finally spoke. "These swings as you name them. Perhaps you cannot. But have you asked yourself whether you should?"

"What do you mean?" Sarah Jane asked, flabbergasted by the question.

"It is like painting. At first there were schools. Themes. Styles. Groups. Then came Dali. If the universe is infinite, everything I paint must exist somewhere, no?"

"It's not quite that simple," the Doctor answered. "But close enough."

"Whatever is causing it, this mixing of worlds," the artist continued "perhaps it is supposed to happen? Perhaps it is like Dali's art. The next stage of our consciousness."

When the Doctor answered, "If the swings don't stop, a lot of people are going to get hurt," Dali simply shrugged.

"Or maybe it all gets muddled together until everything is nothing, like the work of your abstractionist friends," Sarah Jane volunteered. That, at least, caused the artist to shudder.

The quantum compass beeped in acknowledgement that it had successfully acquired the world's eleven-dimensional coordinates. Readings complete, as Sarah Jane and the Doctor returned the compass to its case, Dali approached one of his easels. "What I meant about the swings and the evolution of art and mind, perhaps I can show you better than tell you. This is what I work on currently."

Yanking away the paint-splattered cloth covering the canvas, Dali revealed a dreamlike landscape of Greco-Roman columns and arches, twisting and sagging as if melting from heat, receding to the horizon where they merged with the towering spires of a futuristic city. Along the canvas's right edge was an exaggerated female nude. A pocket watch dominated her swollen belly. Caught mid-explosion, its gears, springs, and hands spilled outward toward the viewer. Replacing the nude's head was a crustacean-like creature with a disturbingly uncanny resemblance to Arthur.

"What do you call it?" Sarah Jane asked, too stunned to think of anything else to say.

"*Los Señores del Tiempo*."

Sarah Jane didn't know much Spanish. But she knew enough. "*Los Señores del Tiempo*? The Time Lords?"

The artist nodded.

Minutes later, Sarah Jane felt relief as the next swing swept them away. Even against the high bar set by her travels with the Doctor, things in Dali's studio had grown a little too weird for comfort.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Reaching the next London amidst a dark and dismal downpour, it lifted Sarah's spirits to find Arthur and, more importantly the Doctor, beside her.

"Mr. Dali certainly has some fascinating ideas," the Doctor commented as he and Sarah Jane trudged through the rain seeking a place to set up the quantum compass. "From the standpoint of abstract discussion anyway."

"Yes, but I wonder if he'd still feel the same way while being eaten by dragon."

"While I hadn't formulated such a colorful example," the Doctor replied, "that was my sentiment as well."

Reunited for the first time since Swinging London, she and the Doctor found a comfortable rhythm. As comfortable as possible, anyway, while visiting distant, and sometimes not so distant, cousins of Sarah Jane's home. Swinging from alternate to alternate, Sarah Jane and the Doctor scouted out an open yet unobtrusive spot, set up the eleven-dimensional quantum compass, and recorded the alternate's coordinates.

Each swing carried Arthur along with them as well. Residents in London after London proving unaware of or indifferent to his strangeness, the pair grew completely brazen about traveling openly with him.

Explaining his remark from back in post-Spanish London that people's obliviousness to Arthur was bad, the Doctor hypothesized that the wibbley-wobbley timey-wimey had weakened so much that the various Londons were bleeding into each other. With the exception of people like Dali, Sarah Jane, and the Doctor who possessed some degree of reality inertia, space-time relativism meant, no matter how outré the contamination might be, inhabitants wouldn't recognize it as such. They would react to things which didn't belong, like Arthur, as if they were perfectly normal.

The Doctor feared what that said about how much, or rather how little, time remained for them to identity and resolve the cause of the swings before Dr. Hadley's "existential event horizon." Worse he suspected it might point toward that event being a probability collapse erasing every London rather than *only* the problem of an alternate London replacing Sarah Jane's in prime space-time.

Still, being able to travel openly with Arthur made much things easier for them. It even allowed them, once they had taken their readings, to indulge in a bit of tourism. Sarah Jane enjoyed piecing together how each London differed from her city while awaiting the next swing to carry them to another alternate with its own history, traditions, and character.

That blustery, squalling London

they encountered after leaving Dali behind was part of a world where Chaucer died in infancy. Absent his standardizing influence, English remained more Saxon than Norman. Showing that space-time relativism hadn't entirely lost its grip on her, as they took their readings in the muddy rear yard of a public house, she insisted to the Doctor that her name was pronounced "Sarah Gein Smit."

From there, they traveled to a troubled London still suffering aftereffects from the debacle of an un-abdicated Edward the VIII, leading to the monarchy's fall and a British Republic still young and fragile when Halifax led it against the Third Reich in a Second World War lasting until '48.

After that same war, the next alternate's UK had renounced empire, poured the dividends into space exploration, and beaten both the Americans and Soviets to the moon. Even though it was not her London or her Britain, Sarah Jane still experienced a rush of pride as she and the Doctor stood outside a television shop watching the crew of the *Lunar Hind* plant the Union Jack on the moon's surface for the seventh time.

Swinging away again, the first thing Sarah Jane noticed was this new London's architecture: epic, monumental, and in love with robust, unornamented columns. That made it easy to overlook the writing on street signs and newspapers. So closely did its style match her world's that it took Sarah Jane time to recognize that the letters themselves did not. The characters of this London's alphabet had a sharp, wedge-like quality unlike the even angles of Latin script.

"Arabic?" she asked her companion.

"Phoenician, I'd think," the Doctor offered.

Passing a trendy outdoor café with what she presumed to be its daily specials chalked in a 3,000 year-old alphabet, Sarah Jane observed patrons having a pint and enjoying traditional English fare while listening to skiffle music play over a speaker. Sarah Jane had been an awkward young girl during skiffle's heyday. Still, even for her, the sounds of the guitar, washboard, and improvised bass awakened memories.

"Is this the Quarrymen?" Sarah Jane asked a passing waiter.

"Who else?" the server replied with an expression suggesting he couldn't believe someone might be so unhip as to be uncertain of that.

The idea that, in 1972, skiffle was still the music of the smart set didn't sit right with her. A few doors down, passing a second-hand store doubling as a record shop, Sarah Jane stopped for a chat with its clerk. While the exchange left him thoroughly confused, she found it illuminating. Rock 'n' roll had never come to this London. Perhaps it had never arisen in this world at all.

"Well, Doctor, I'd say we've found another instance of alternate Londons contaminating each other."

"What do you mean?"

The Doctor's knowledge of the universe and its inhabitants, including humanity, never ceased to amaze Sarah Jane. But the universe was a very big place. Of necessity, the Doctor's understanding was broad rather than deep. Details of popular culture, especially, sometimes flew under his radar

and Sarah Jane had to spell this one out. "Doesn't it seem unlikely that you could have as big a difference as the retention of an ancient alphabet that England never used in the first place and yet somehow skiffle music emerges as if nothing's changed?"

"I take your point, Sarah," he acknowledged. "An enlightening exercise. May I suggest a secondary objective for our travels? Once we take our readings, that's paramount of course, let's use our time before the next swing to look for contamination. Beyond everyone's acceptance of our little friend, anyway." The Doctor smiled at Arthur. "Oh, I admit it lacks rigorous scientific methodology, but it may give us a rough idea of how quickly things are deteriorating."

The next alternate began with a curious echo for Sarah Jane: a nasty traffic jam. Furious honking rose from gridlocked motors up and down Regent Street. After taking readings in a vacant shop, they investigated the cause of the stopped cars. Continuing to Piccadilly Circus, they found hundreds of cattle blocking one of London's major junctions. Or something like cattle. As tall as Sarah Jane, with muscular frames and long, forward-curving horns, the animals could seriously damage a car, to say nothing of a person.

Sarah Jane had seen such creatures before. As illustrations in textbooks and skeletons in museums. "Aurochs?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"They died out hundreds of years ago. Well, for us they did."

"I think they did here, to." This time it was the Doctor who made the case for contamination. "Look at the buildings. The streets. Even the automobiles. Nothing here is designed with loose herds of dangerous animals in mind. Nobody has a monopoly on bad urban planning, but that stretches credibility."

As shrill motor horn drowned-out their conversation. Looking across the circus, Sarah Jane spotted an irritated businessman in a green MG leaning against his vehicle's horn. It wasn't long before a nearby bull auroch registered irritation of his own at the noise, pawing Piccadilly's pavement with a heavy hoof. When the honking persisted, the animal charged, striking the MG with a fearsome clang. Though stumbling a bit as it wandered away, the auroch appeared far less damaged than the pricey sports car. Though unhurt, the driver laid off his horn.

Talking with locals confirmed the Doctor's suspicions. True, they answered questions with statements like "Oh, yes, those are just the aurochs." But their replies came with confused, almost dazed looks. As if these Londoners' minds weren't fully reconciled to the responses their mouths gave. For their part, the aurochs looked equally bewildered by their surroundings.

The next London so closely matched Sarah Jane's that it took time to spot the divergence. This Britain hadn't decimalized its currency in 1971. Here, instead of the convenient 100 pence to the pound, Londoners still had to recall that there were 12 pennies to the shilling and 20 shillings to the pound.

Nor did evidence of cross-alternate contamination prove easy to find. Only a thorough perusal of the nearest newsagent's turned up the curious de-

tail that the MP for Chelsea was a Lizard Person. While the elderly newsagent initially proved unhelpful with the inquiries of two people who showed no inclination to make a purchase, the Doctor's patrician charm eventually won her over.

There appeared to be no other Lizard People in London. Nor had there ever been. Nor did any special folklore or mythology exist about such beings. The MP's parents were a nice, entirely mammalian, couple named Thomas and Claire. Ditto his wife and two children. And yet, this anomaly did not excite special concern or even note from the otherwise canny woman.

There followed a London in which the descendants of Cromwell's Puritan Roundheads presided over an austere Fabian socialist population. The improbable combination had successfully banished poverty from London, along with most of its life and color. It concerned the Doctor that, this time, he was unable to identify which element was the contaminant and which was the authentic native timeline; possible further evidence the disturbances neared a critical event.

When the next London clearly suffered contamination from multiple alternates, the Doctor's anxiety only deepened. Anti-war demonstrations—"riots" was really a better word—paralyzed the city as Londoners turned out en masse protesting Britain's involvement in the latest U.S. civil war. As police used water cannons mounted in low flying dirigibles to subdue demonstrators, the city sweltered in the tropical heat while parrots and colobus monkeys cavorted alongside pigeons, squirrels, and other traditional representatives of London's urban fauna.

While endemic chaos made it easy for Sarah Jane and the Doctor to take their readings without drawing attraction, this London held an unexpected pitfall. Honoring Britain's early abolitionists, the protestors adopted Georgian and Victorian attire. An unfortunate coincidence that very nearly landed the anachronistically-dressed Doctor in the back of a Black Maria on suspicion of being an instigator.

Pleading with the officers that her "feeble grandfather" required her assistance to get around and couldn't possibly be a troublemaker, the situation darkly amused Sarah Jane. While thoroughly alarmed by the Doctor's vintage greatcoat and frilly shirt, the police ignored the utterly alien Arthur splashing happily nearby in puddles left by the riot dirigibles. Though never completely convincing them, Sarah Jane kept the officers talking long enough for the next swing to whisk the trio to safety.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Lucky number eleven?" The Doctor asked her as they arrived at the next London.

"Let's hope so," Sarah Jane replied. "Of course, that only means we can get to the source of the problem. We still have to stop it."

The first thing Sarah Jane noticed about this city was its crisp, clean air. Not since Arthur's world had London smelled so fresh. And that was despite numerous horses on its wide, unpaved streets alongside automobiles and omnibuses like the ones her grandparents might have traveled in.

Well, not all of them. As she and the Doctor crossed an intersection, a vehicle resembling a motorized chariot

nearly ran them down. Arthur, producing one of the sudden bursts of speed belying his bulky appearance, rushed well clear of the contraption. Dumfounded, Sarah Jane watched the chariot roar away. She felt certain its driver was none other than the young man who'd nearly run them over in Swinging London. Absent his greatcoat, ascot, and sunglasses, he now wore a brightly-colored tunic, long hair trailing out behind him.

"Doctor, did you see…"

"Yes, Sarah, even within infinite variety there is repetition," he replied, unaware of how prophetic his words would shortly become.

Pedestrians went about in tunics, breeches, or short skits. More properly "kilts," Sarah Jane realized. She saw little difference between men and women's attire, even the copious amounts of jewelry in whatever metal the individual could afford. And both sexes traveled heavily armed: swords, daggers, spears, and occasionally the firearms of, to her, half a century ago. Their language was not English, not even close. But a smattering of Welsh, picked up at uni and kept reasonably sharp through assignments in that country, let her get the gist of their speech.

The broad street led them to a public square where a ceremony was in progress. At its center, a statue of a woman decked out like an ancient warrior towered over the square. To one side, waiting musicians held drums, bagpipes, and horns; the latter including a species so enormous it required two people to hold it while a third played. In front of the statue, a woman gave a speech to the gathered crowd. But "speech" wasn't quite the right word. Her cadence and delivery marked her as more poet that politician.

With his almost infinite capacity for languages, the Doctor no doubt understood more. But Sarah Jane picked out the speech-poem's salient elements. The ceremony commemorated the anniversary of the coronation of Brastagia the Ninth, Queen of the Britons, the Picts, and the Eiru. The poet's lengthy elegy gave Sarah Jane the context for this London: a world where Boudicca's rebellion succeeded, the druidic groves at Anglesey never felt the torch, and Rome never recovered its foothold on the island.

After the ceremony concluded with the band's rendition of "Gods Save the Queen," Sarah Jane and the Doctor mixed with the crowd and inquired as to the nearest location which would serve their purposes for taking an eleventh and final reading. Sarah Jane's accent and imperfect mastery of the native tongue led locals to mark her as a foreigner; which, she supposed, she was. Approaching fluency but not quite nailing the accent, they thought Doctor's "dialect" from some other part of the realm, usually Pictland.

The natives informed them of a large park not far from the square, though several also cautioned them about hotheaded young "sword-swingers" frequenting the area.

As they followed the directions given them, Sarah Jane and the Doctor remarked at some of the dishes enjoyed by patrons at numerous taverns. Curries. Chinese noodles. Pizza. While the Doctor wouldn't rule out that they were authentic to a world more cosmopolitan that it appeared, he thought

it more likely to be another example of bleed-over between different potential Londons.

Sarah Jane expected their destination to be a well-tended and well-manicured area of public enjoyment. Instead, it was a "park" in the medieval sense of the word: a marked-off area of wilderness. Avoiding a large yew grove from which chanting and singing arose, they pushed through brambles, bushes, and trees deeper into the park. Fox, badgers, some kind of giant hare, and even large deer fled their approach. Halting in a small meadow, the Doctor approvingly surveyed the site, seemingly convinced they had found a place safe from prying eyes.

As he and Sarah Jane prepared to gather their final set of readings, seven young people in leathers emerged from the trees. They carried long hunting spears and had rifles slung over their shoulders. A golden torc encircling the neck of the man at the fore marked him as their leader.

"Strangers in the park?" He laughed, making no effort to conceal his approval of Sarah Jane's appearance before his eyes fell upon the horseshoe crab.

"And what is this? Some monster in need of slaying?" Lowering his spear, its wicked tip stopped just centimeters shy of Arthur. Scuttling back from the weapon, he clicked and chattered uneasily.

"You will do no such thing," Sarah Jane announced, kicking the spear's shaft away from her companion.

As some of the torc-wearing man's companions laughed and others stood in shocked silence, he flushed crimson. "I am Gwawl, son of Gwastad, and a chieftain with four forties of rifles sworn to my service," he proclaimed, seemingly as much to his friends as to the strangers. "And it is my right by blood to take whatever game I find within the park."

Taking measure of Gwawl, Sarah Jane saw a blustery overgrown boy, not a bully, much less a thug. Even now, his expression and body language proclaimed a clear desire for Sarah Jane's approval. And, despite her better judgement, she wanted to like him. But she intuited that he felt trapped. As much as he wanted to please her, he dreaded losing face in front of his companions.

"I will have my due." Though Gwawl sounded like he was trying to convince himself as much as his friends, he confidently brought his spear back around toward Arthur.

"Your valor does you credit, Gwawl, son of Gwastad. No one could doubt it," the Doctor approached the young chieftain. Sarah Jane felt her usual mixture of frustration and relief when the Doctor stepped in to "rescue" her from a situation. This time, with Arthur's safety on the line, the later emotion dominated.

"But," the Doctor continued, "I'm afraid I must insist that you leave this one alone."

His attention initially focused on Sarah Jane and Arthur, the chieftain's demeanor changed as Gwawl seemingly took stock of the Doctor for the first time. "Forgive me, revered one, is this beast under the druids' protection?"

"Eh, yes, druids," the Doctor replied, taking a moment to catch the case of mistaken identity. After doing so, he embraced the role, adding "And of the gods," going on to list off a half

dozen Celtic deities.

That, apparently, provided Gwawl the out he needed. Because harming Arthur was taboo, his authority wasn't really being challenged. "I beg your pardon. We take our leave of you. Revered One. M'Lady." Gwawl bowed. He stole glances back at Sarah Jane until his company departed the same way they had come.

"Normally, I disapprove of imitating clergy, Sarah," the Doctor explained, "but, as with anything, there are exceptions."

"Thank you, Doctor," Sarah Jane said, resting a reassuring hand on Arthur. "Let's just get this done and get out of here."

Assembling the eleven-dimensional quantum compass and holding the device as the Doctor circled her with the sonic screwdriver, Sarah Jane watched each of its crystals light-up in turn.

"Is that it, Doctor?" Sarah Jane's eyes sparkled. "Do we have our coordinates?"

He took a moment to confirm, "We do, Sarah," he grinned. "Time to get to the bottom of all this."

Separating the compass from the surveying rod and packing away the dodecahedron in its container, sounds from the bushes disturbed them. Exasperated, Sarah Jane presumed Gwawl and his warriors had returned. Either because the chieftain rethought his boast about harming Arthur or because he'd wanted another look at her.

Instead of Gwawl, it was the hooded figure who pushed through the brambles, emerging so near her that he could have reached out and touched Sarah Jane. As the figure raised its hands, Sarah Jane recoiled, fearing he was about to do exactly that. Rather than touching her, the mysterious pursuer yanked down his cowl.

Even the Doctor was clearly and unmistakably shocked. Sarah Jane gasped at confronting her own likeness. Almost.

The woman's skin was white. Not Caucasian pink. Nor even the pale tone of albinism. But the white of whole milk. There was something else, something about the eyes, Sarah Jane realized, but it took her a moment to spot it. Proportionally, the figure's pupils were twice the size of hers. Yet her face matched Sarah Jane's in all other particulars.

"You're me!" Sarah Jane explained.

"Yes, and you're me," her double replied.

"Fascinating," the Doctor replied guardedly, as if a hundred thoughts traveled beneath that single word.

Arthur repeated his performance from back in his native world, looking with consternation from one near-identical woman to the other. *No wonder the poor thing was so confused before,* Sarah Jane thought.

"I spotted you in that London where bombs were falling," her double continued. "I figured that if anyone would believe me and help me, it would be me. I mean you. But every time I got close, you ran away and I'd lose you in the next substitution."

Sarah Jane looked thoughtful. "I think, on some level, I knew you were me. As time went on, I recognized something familiar about you. But that just disturbed me more. Plus, I don't know how people dress where you're from, but in most places dark, full length robes don't exactly encourage comfort or trust."

"I'm sorry." Her double frowned. "I didn't have a choice. The sun is so strong everywhere else. And we don't look *quite* like the rest of you. They wanted to burn me as a demon on the first alternate I visited. If the substitution hadn't happened when it did, they probably would have. I 'borrowed' the cloak in the next world. At first, that was nearly as bad. But eventually people seemed not to notice or care.

Sarah Jane wondered if that, too, resulted from the bleed-over effect, making even the preposterous seem normal. Regardless, Sarah Jane felt badly for having snapped at her other self. Remembering something her double said earlier, she felt even worse. "What help do you need?"

"I must return to my reality. And I need you to come with me. I have to show them the alternates are real. That there are people here."

While not understanding everything her double meant, Sarah Jane understood it was a secondary consideration at the moment. "I want to help. I'm sure the Doctor will, too. But we are in the middle of something very important," she answered. "Perhaps if you come along while we take care of that, we can get you back home afterward?"

"Hold on a moment, Sarah," the Doctor interjected, "I'm far from convinced that the one might not be the other. Sarah, other Sarah, I mean, why don't you start at the beginning and tell us what this is all about?"

"I will explain it as best I can. My friend back home, he's a scientist. He could do better.

"Centuries ago, nobody knows the exact year, our sun started fading. So slowly it was almost unnoticeable from one generation to next. People called it the Dimming. Eventually, our scientists discovered that part of a different universe had erupted into our solar system through a puncture in space-time. And it was choking our sun.

"Eventually, the diminishing light and decreasing radiation changed our appearance. And disrupted the environment. For a long time we found ways to cope. But eventually there wasn't enough energy reaching Earth for us to survive. Fusion power plugged the gap for a while. When even that became insufficient, it seemed like we were facing extinction.

"But our scientists realized the fabric of the cosmos itself held enormous amounts of energy. If we found a way to tap that, we could get all the power we'd ever need.

"And the scientists did find a way. The friend I mentioned is one of them. But he also figured out there could be alternate dimensions out there with people just like us. And, if there were, our harvesting cosmic energy would wreak havoc on them. We tried to warn people, our people I mean, but they wouldn't listen. So he reworked one of the turbines collecting cosmic energy to send me into the alternates. We hoped I'd be able to return and confirm the alternates were inhabited."

"Doctor, you were right," Sarah Jane said, "The one is the other."

"Well, Sarah. Other Sarah, I mean," the Doctor clarified. "Not only can we get you home, as it turns out we're headed there ourselves. It would be good if we can get to the TARDIS, our transport, before the next substitution, as you call them. We may have less time than we realized."

They looked at him with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

"Something Other Sarah said clicked it into place for me," the Doctor explained. "Normally, the universe has mechanisms to avoid paradox by preventing people from meeting their alternative selves. In an infinite universe, exceptions do exist, of course. But I suspect that's why you only encountered each other as the next swing, or the next substitution, was imminent. In the moments beforehand, quantum structure weakened enough for such meetings to briefly become possible. If the three of us have had this conversation with no swing, I fear the wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey is now in near constant wibble-wobble. And the existential event horizon is at hand."

With that dire forecast, they departed the park toward the massive temple to Brigid whose location corresponded with the Tower of Sarah Jane's London. Hopefully, the TARDIS would be there.

"While we're strolling," the Doctor began, "there is a small matter which needs addressing."

"Which is?" the Sarah Janes replied together.

"I can't just call you both 'Sarah' and I refuse to keep saying 'Sarah' and 'Other Sarah,'" he responded. "We need a better way to differentiate the two of you."

"Why don't you call me 'One,'" Sarah Jane responded, "because I'm the one you met first?"

"And I'll be 'Two,'" her doppelganger proclaimed brightly.

"That's not a little demeaning and dehumanizing?" the Doctor asked, "Referring to different incarnations of the same individual only by number?"

"I don't see anything wrong with it," the Sarah Janes answered in unison.

"And, please, try not to do that again," the Doctor said shaking his head as he looked from one to the other.

CHAPTER NINE

Exiting the TARDIS, Sarah Jane glanced over her shoulder to see what the machine's chameleon circuits would do in Two's home world. Similarities made the differences all the more striking. The Doctor's transport still appeared as a call box, but one of sleek, rectangular gray metal. More ominous to her was the way the word "POLICE" had been replaced by "SECURITY" in a plain, utilitarian font. "Doctor, look at the TARDIS," she said.

"I know, Sarah," he replied. "But I suggest you take in the big picture as well." His muted tones suggesting layers of meaning, Sarah Jane turned around.

A vast opaque dome stretched across the sky, casting the world below in unnatural twilight. Glittering with lights and packed more tightly than pins in a pin cushion, sleek towers stretched a kilometer or more into the air. Most of them, constructed of repeating modular segments, reminded Sarah Jane of the "stacked children's blocks" the Doctor had used as an analogy for the potential Londons piled atop each other.

Other buildings were thin and needle-like. A few, irregular in shape and thickness, had spherical or teardrop-shaped protrusions, as if designed by some space-aged Gaudi. Trains ran

through transparent tubes connecting the largest towers. Other vehicles, resembling the progeny of a jet plane and automobile, soared between the buildings' vast spans.

"Welcome to Archology One," Two proclaimed, "sometimes still called 'London.'"

"And it's 1972 here, too?" Sarah Jane stammered. Carefully maintaining his "seen it all, done it all" air, the Doctor said nothing. But Sarah Jane knew him well enough to see even he was taken aback.

"Yes," Two acknowledged. "It was a surprise, a rude shock really, when none of the alternates were like this." As she spoke, Two removed her robe, revealing drab and utilitarian slacks, blouse, and blazer beneath. After neatly folding the robe under one arm, she produced a plastic badge with strange symbols of various colors. As Two affixed the badge to her blazer, Sarah Jane saw its top read "S.J. Smith."

The TARDIS had materialized in the shadows between two mammoth buildings. Beyond, a boulevard swarmed with pedestrians. Trains packed full of people ran constantly but made no more noise that a strong wind. Every ten meters, street lamps gave off an artificial yellow-white imitation of sunlight.

"Well, Two," the Doctor said eagerly. "Let's see this wonder world of yours."

As they emerged onto the sidewalk, pedestrians stopped. Some gasped or even pointed. Among a population sharing Two's blanched skin and large pupils, her visitors stood out. Here, Sarah Jane's clothes seemed positively flamboyant. And the Doctor might as well have been wearing Harlequin's motley. But it was Arthur who drew the lion's share of attention and apprehension. Unlike other Londons, space-time relativism was clearly not at work in Archology One. These people knew what belonged. And what didn't.

Scattered gawkers coalesced into a crowd. The crowd grew into a mob. Many of its members had produced black devices about the dimensions of paperback and pointed the objects' broad side toward Sarah Jane and company. "What in the world is that?" shrieked a middle-aged man whose nose reminded Sarah Jane of a pig's snout as he pointed at the horseshoe crab.

"Two," the Doctor whispered under his breath while treating the crowd to his most reassuring, grandfatherly smile. "There's still time to get burned at the stake. And even if you don't, we might. This is your world, please find some way to deal with this."

Stepping forward, Two improvised. "Special effects wizardry. It's a street promotion for a new video program." While speaking so everyone could hear, she focused her attention on Pig Nose. Perhaps she did so because he'd dared to directly address the strange company, and by some unspoken mechanism he had become the mob's de facto leader.

"I hardly think so," Pig Nose scoffed. "Programming is Entertainment Division. You're wearing an Information Services IdentiTag," he proclaimed, scrutinizing Two's badge.

"Program planning and production is Entertainment Division. Program *promotion* is Information Services," Two retorted, her expression proclaiming "I can't believe anyone would be so stupid as to not know that."

Whether it was Two's rebuttal or simply her air of authority, Pig Nose was cowed, seeming to shrink a full head smaller.

"Everything is fine, folks," Two proclaimed to the crowd. "Information Services wanted a stunt that would grab people's attention. Clearly, we got one."

"What's it about?" a woman asked.

"What?" Two wondered.

"The video program," the questioner clarified. "What's it about?"

Two fumbled for a moment before glancing at her companions and finding inspiration. "It's about a group of characters having adventures as they travel through time and space."

"Bosh!" Pig Nose proclaimed. "Who would watch such a thing? It'll be withdrawn after a season."

Despite his proclamation, many of the others appeared intrigued. Though they'd clearly taken her bait, Two still regarded the crowd uneasily. "One more thing, there's a video embargo on the promotion until its premier. So, no daemons."

The crowd stowed their black devices, some with clear reluctance.

"A promotion with a video embargo? How's that supposed to work?" a look of hope reappeared on Pig Nose's face.

"It's an old-fashioned word of mouth campaign," Two retorted. "You look like you remember those. Well, Information Services is bringing them back." Bested a second time, Pig Nose slunk into the crowd.

With immediate danger passed, Two handed her robe to Sarah Jane. "Put this on. Between the odd appearance of you two and Arthur, we've got enough to answer for without you being my double."

"Doctor," Sarah Jane asked after donning the garment, "why isn't space-time relativism operating here?"

"I hate to sound like a broken record but, without research, I can't say for certain." He frowned. "Hazarding a guess? As the anomaly's source, Archology One exists in a bubble of stability. A little like a hurricane's eye or the event horizon of a black hole, it's a tiny area immune to the chaos around it."

Ignoring the exchange, Two's thoughts still dwelled on their encounter with the mob. "I can't believe that man questioned me," she vented as they walked. "I don't know if that's true about program promotion, it's not really my department. But if I don't know, he certainly doesn't. He's got a General Services IdtitiTag," she said, as if that explained everything.

With time to adjust to the monumental strangeness of Archology One's architecture and urban landscape, Sarah Jane began paying more attention to its inhabitants. Even those whose ancestors appeared to have come from beyond Europe, and there were quite a few, manifested only the slightest beige in their skin. Archology One's fashion was not as monotonous as a bad science-fiction movie or even Mao's China, but too drab and repetitious to pass muster in most Londons Sarah Jane had seen. Pants were pleated khaki or denim. Women favored pants as often as simple skirts descending to the knees. Both options came with ample pockets, she noticed enviously. Comfortable button-down shirts or blouses were unprepossessing earth tones or white, black, or gray. Those whose lifework appeared to be

manual trades preferred dungarees. People with a more executive bearing accessorized with matching jumpers or blazers over their shirts. A canvas purse, called a "utility bag" by Two, appeared to be unisex and ubiquitous. And IdentiTags, worn prominently over the left breast, were universal.

From her pocket, Two pulled out one of the small black devices. "Daemons" Sarah Jane thought Two had called them. Seeing one up close, she noted it had a matte side and a glossy side. As Two took it in hand, its glossy side lit up. She tapped the illuminated surface a couple dozen times before returning it to her pants. "I let my friend knows were coming. And that we've had some trouble."

"Daemons?"" Sarah Jane inquired. "What are they exactly?"

Two gave the convoluted response of someone explaining something so fundamental that its purpose was axiomatic and needed no articulation. If Sarah Jane understood correctly, the electronic devices were phone, camera, and calendar all in one. They could also exchange written messages, Two called them "eGrams," like the one she'd sent to her friend. And they were able to access information stored on computers around the city.

The daemons themselves, Sarah Jane grasped, were also a kind of computer. With a mix of awe and unease, she realized Archology One's residents walked around with machines more powerful than the behemoth beneath Base 5. The Doctor, on the other hand, regarded the device with wry amusement. It was precisely the kind of fussy, convoluted use of technology which he found so baffling about humans.

As they walked, Two frequently repeated her explanation about her strange companions to curious, confused, and alarmed residents. Fortunately, each time, the story grew a little more confident and polished.

Sarah Jane had another question for Two. "That man back there said you're 'Information Services?'" Sarah Jane asked. "Does that mean you're a journalist, too?"

"Not exactly. I encountered that concept on several alternates, but it hasn't really existed in Archology One for a long time. Information Services provides citizens with information the Directorate considers essential or beneficial."

The Doctor had a question of his own, "Two, how many residents does Archology One have?"

"A little over one hundred million."

The Doctor whistled. Under his breath, he whispered to Sarah Jane. "Many species are perfectly happy living in hives. Humans are not one of them."

Two led them to one of the massive modular towers, she referred to it as a *ResPlan Block* before adding, "My friend lives here." From a massive marble foyer that wasn't quite Georgian and wasn't quite deco, Two led them into a lift where she entered their destination on a keypad.

Its doors opened on the 173rd floor into a hallway with green carpet running down the middle of the tile floor. Every 20 meters, a doorframe broke the metal wall's smooth contours. Midway between each door hung lighted canvases of brightly colored geometrical shapes and lines. Stopping at a door otherwise indistinct from all the others, Two pushed a button beside

its frame. As electronic chimes sounded on the door's other side, Sarah found it comforting that at least one thing here was familiar.

A young man opened the door, breaking into a huge grin at seeing Two. "Sarah Jane, I'm so happy you're back," he exclaimed, wrapping Two in an embrace. Then, as if finally registering the presence of two other people, his body language became formal. "I mean, Informational Specialist Smith, you're retuned safely. I'm pleased. Who are your associates?" As the young man noticed Arthur, his alarmed gaze lingered on the creature.

"Scientist Venkatagiri," Two said, "we'd better get inside." After the door shut behind them, it was Two who initiated the embrace. "Linus," she hugged him, "it's so good to see you." Stepping back, she introduced the others.

"This is the Doctor. He's a scientist like you. We call the smart little bug Arthur. He looks a fright, but I promise he's a sweetheart. And this," she said yanking down the robe's hood, "is Sarah Jane Smith."

Seeing double, Linus gasped.

"You were right, Linus," Two beamed. "They're the proof!"

Linus caught Two's grin "The alternates?"

"Inhabited. Almost all of them."

"Then we were right?"

"Yes."

Sarah Jane watched a curious glance pass between the Archology One natives. Their smiles wavered as if an unpleasant truth lingered beneath the otherwise happy occasion.

"You must be hungry?" Linus asked.

"Famished!" the Sarah Janes proclaimed together as the Doctor flinched.

"They eat…the same things as us?" their host looked at Two.

"Yes," she replied, "other than our adaptations to our sun, as far as I can tell, they are identical to us in every way."

As Linus busied himself in his flat's small kitchen, Sarah Jane, Two, and the Doctor sat on couches of some dark, synthetic leather. "Two?" Sarah Jane asked. "What is going on here? Why is your London so different?"

"Well, I wasn't exactly doing a comparative history. I had more pressing concerns." If it sounded like Two snapped at her double, Sarah Jane knew better. Two's tone covered embarrassment at not knowing something she felt she should have. Sarah Jane sometimes did the same thing, after all. And Two was her, or close enough, anyway.

"I have a guess, though," her doppelganger continued more civilly. "Out in the alternates, I never heard anyone mention the Reasoncy."

"The Reasoncy?" Sarah Jane asked.

"Sounds like I'm on the right track then," Two observed. As she told it, it all started with a clique of Enlightenment philosophers who believed society could be ordered along rational and utilitarian lines for the general good. When their ideas for analytically and empirically managing the army and navy led to swift victory over Napoleon, the philosophers found themselves supported by industrialists, politicians, and the aristocracy.

Interrupting Two's story, Linus called them to a small dining table. In front of each of them he sat a plate of

roast beef and gravy with mashed potatoes, peas, and carrots. Sarah Jane put a forkful of beef into her mouth. The flavor was good. Then she noticed the texture. It was off, somehow. Almost like potted meat. Based on Linus's expression, she must have made a face. "I'm sorry," he apologized.

"No, I'm sorry," Sarah Jane countered, embarrassed by her faux pas.

"Oh," said Two. "I think I understand. Neither of you need be sorry." She looked at Linus, "The alternates still harvest meat from animals." Turning to the Sarah Jane and the Doctor, Two explained. "Livestock are inefficient uses of Archology One's limited energy and material. You're eating synthesized protein intended to mimic animal flesh. Apparently, we don't have it quite right."

Shrugging, Sarah Jane took another bite. For meat from a machine, it wasn't bad. And the vegetables, grown hydroponically, rated highly.

Awkwardness smoothed over, Two completed her tale. After the Napoleonic War, when George III's instability forced his abdication, the philosophers' influence became codified into law. Officially called the Directorate, informally people called it the Reasoncy. By either name, it had run the country ever since. And most other nations had adopted similar forms of management.

Her story complete, Two pivoted to another topic. "As I told you," she said to Sarah Jane and the Doctor, "Linus, Scientist Venkatagiri, is part of the team who developed the process to harvest cosmic energy. And he's the one who realized the alternates might be inhabited. He can answer your questions better than I can."

As Sarah Jane steeled herself for another jargon-filled exchange like the one in Snowden's XCR, the Doctor launched into questioning their host. In response, Linus explained the physics behind the intrusion of alien matter and energy into Archology One's Solar System.

"Interesting," the Doctor replied. "In our terms, what you're describing is an eruption of negative E-Space into the N-Space of the Normal, or Prime, Universe. E-Space can have very curious properties. Suppressing your sun's ability to produce nuclear fusion and siphoning off its hydrogen are entirely in line with the kind of effects I'd expect."

From astrophysics, Linus moved to the implications of the E-Space eruption for his planet. "Optimally, the Earth should receive 174 quadrillion joules of energy from the sun. Even with the archologies and fusion reactors, we'll soon fall below the threshold for sustaining complex lifeforms.

"Decades ago, Archology One's top scientist, Dr. Terrance Goodkyne, realized there was another option. One theoretically dwarfing the potential of fusion reactors: cosmic energy. The power latent within the structure of what you call N-space. Arguing that transforming his theory into reality would require enormous resources and control, Goodkyne persuaded the High Council to make him Director not only of the cosmic energy initiative but of Archology One itself.

"In the process of mastering N-space's mathematics, we discovered the idea of alternate dimensional realities. And that tapping energy from N-space would weaken them. But we thought alternate dimensions were a

theoretical construct, like imaginary numbers. Something that existed in mathematics but not in reality. At least that's what the project's leadership thought. Director Goodkyne proclaimed the probability any of the alternates were inhabited was quadrillions-to-one.

"So, what happened?" the Doctor asked.

"I guess I did," Linus replied with an almost baffled expression. "I've only been with CosDiv, that's the Cosmic Energy Division that manages the project, for a couple years. Director Goodkyne asked me to recheck some of the math to be sure we'd optimized the cosmic turbines' neutrino arrays. In the process, I concluded that many of his underlying assumptions regarding the improbability of inhabited alternates were highly questionable.

"I made my own calculations. And they turned the director's results on their head. I had it quadrillions-to-one that the alternates *weren't* inhabited. With that in mind, I expanded the math on exactly what harvesting cosmic energy would do to alternates. Horrified by my results, I immediately went to the director. But he either couldn't see or didn't want to see."

A pang of envy struck Sarah Jane as, within an hour of their meeting, Linus earned the Doctor's "That's impressive, period" look.

"So, I decided to take my case to the public," their host continued. "I went down to the Information Services complex looking for someone, anyone, who would listen. That's how I met Sarah Jane, I mean Two." For a moment, the scientist's serious expression melted as he and Two looked at each other.

"It only took about five seconds before his math lost me," Two admitted. "But I understood his TLDR well enough." Even if Sarah Jane had no idea what a TLDR was, the context was clear. "And he was obviously sincere," her double continued. "Even if it turned out to be wrong, it needed investigating."

"Unfortunately, her bosses weren't about to go against Director Goodkyne's word," Linus added.

"So I did the only thing I could do," Two shrugged. "I made an unauthorized broadcast. I should have known it would be word of a junior information specialist and a scientist nobody had heard of against our great and wise director. We were summarily ignored."

"And professionally censured," Linus added. "If either of us ever advances above our current positions, it will be a miracle."

"Despondent, we came back here, to Linus's flat."

"That night I realized that by reconfiguring one of the cosmic turbines, its power could be used to send a small object, like a person, out into those alternates."

"What could I do?" Two explained. "I volunteered to be that person. If I couldn't help one way, I'd help the other."

"I knew there was a risk that Director Goodkyne was right about all those parallel Londons being mathematical abstractions and I was sending Two into oblivion. But we didn't really have another choice. Once she left, I managed to put the machines on hold for several days for 'critical maintenance.' The archology's energy reserves can hold out that long. I hoped

it would make things easier for Two. But when I didn't hear from her for so long, I feared the worst."

Sarah Jane wondered if the shutdown Linus mentioned corresponded with her prolonged stay in Arthur's world.

"The plan was for me to show up in an alternate, explain the situation, and have the locals send me back with proof of their reality," Two explained. "But we never expected how primitive the other Londons would be!" she continued before giving her doppelganger an embarrassed look. "Oh, I'm sorry." She blushed vividly under her white skin.

"It's okay," Sarah Jane said, casting a sidelong glance at the Doctor, "I'm used to it."

"Two," Linus said enthusiastically, "I'd love to hear about your experiences out there."

Two didn't just tell, she showed. Her daemon stored hundreds of crisp, clean color images which she used to supplement her stories. Remarkable though the handheld devices were, it wasn't until that moment that Sarah Jane truly coveted them. They made her film camera seem like a child's toy in comparison.

Pictures of peasants wielding pitchforks and torches rendered Two's story about nearly burning at the stake all the more powerful. Sarah Jane gasped at photos from Londons she'd not encountered, like one where rising sea-levels transformed the city into a British Venice, complete with gondoliers. A photo of a dragon, wings spread wide as it perched atop St. Paul's dome, was the most magnificent. Perhaps it was the same beast she'd encountered on the M4, perhaps not, but Sarah Jane didn't doubt it was of the same London that marked her entry into the tale. And if she thought her double lingered overlong on how Sarah Jane fled from her every approach, it was still interesting to hear and see Two's experiences in Londons they'd shared. Two, also, had been taken for a performance artist in Swinging London and a druid in the city ruled by Boudicca's descendants. And, from Arthur's world, her daemon recorded a huge and menacing scorpion-like predator from which Two had fled.

"Remarkable what the death of a star might set into motion," the Doctor commented more to himself than the others. Though his gaze remained piercingly analytic, his wrinkled face radiated enthusiasm so pure it was almost boyish. That was one of the things Sarah Jane admired about him. Nothing was ever just numbers, theory, or a logic problem. The Doctor never lost sight of the reality, the beauty, and the terror behind things. "If I was outside your dome," he asked Two and Linus, "what would I see?"

Linus's face assumed a macabre grin. "Would you like to see?"

CHAPTER TEN

Sarah Jane pulled the parka tightly around herself. Even though only a trio of long, narrow windows allowed her to look outside the energy harvesting sphere, enough cold permeated through their transparent thermo-resistant plastic that every breath condensed in the air in front of her.

It was impossible not to be transfixed by the dim sky, where a sickly sun more properly orange than yellow beat weakly down upon the world of Archology One. Thick layers of snow,

capped by a shell of ice, spread as far as Sarah Jane could see. A ring of enormous harvesting spheres, just like the one she stood in, encircled Archology One. Looking closely, Sarah Jane could see countless rotating triangles, the cosmic turbines, which comprised the spheres' surfaces.

"Did you know, around Archologies Three and Eight, it still gets above freezing in summer?" Linus's tone was almost philosophic as the discordant *Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!* of the sphere's geodesic turbine blades muted his voice. Suddenly he remembered to whom he was speaking "Of course you didn't, sorry. But I can't even imagine what that's like."

His observation prompted another of those conversations between Linus and the Doctor which Sarah Jane happily checked out of. As they tossed around terms like "neutrino-reactive," "weak nuclear force," and "polypolarity," she continued staring through the windows. Clinging to a precarious existence, small copses of wind-twisted conifers offered the only sign of life. The landscape was irregular and uneven. An observer could be forgiven for thinking those snowy mounds concealed small hills rather than buildings of an old London that predated the moment when humanity abandoned all else for the safety of the archologies.

Still, she picked out bits and pieces from the conversation behind her. The meat of it seemed to be that it wasn't the hundred or so harvesting spheres or their rotating turbines which tapped the N-space energy. Rather, an energy field generated by those turbines did. Sarah Jane suspected the ring of spheres surrounding Archology One would precisely match the borders of the shimmering energy dome over her London. While the Doctor likely could have provided confirmation, Sarah Jane kept her own counsel.

Sarah Jane glanced down at her alabaster hands and, underneath the parka, could feel the rigid IdentiTag affixed to her blouse.

Their visit to the energy harvesting sphere marked the first time Sarah Jane and the Doctor had moved without difficulty through Archology One's crowded streets. Wishing to avoid repeating the scenes created by their visitors' first public appearance here, Two and Linus had taken precautions. Two had "borrowed" tubes of white makeup from Information Service's broadcast unit. While eye drops dilated their pupils, they remained smaller than a native's. They'd trust to luck that locals wouldn't look too closely. It seemed a safe bet. People, as a general rule, did not carefully examine the eyes of passersby for signs they might be aliens from an alternate reality.

Departing on an errand of his own, Linus had returned with a pair of IdentiTags and handed one to each of their guests.

"Where did you get those?" Two asked, intrigued.

"From Herbert."

"Custodian Herbert? The old man at your work?"

Linus nodded, "He's from Quadrant East. Back when he grew up there people still called it East End. And he knows people. They're stolen tags that have been modified, wiped, and recoded." It interested Sarah Jane that even in well-heeled Archology One,

there were still people to do those kinds of things.

Properly prepared, they'd ventured out to the sphere. It had been their first solo outing with Linus. Two and Arthur had remained at the scientist's flat. True, Sarah Jane and the Doctor now had proper Archology One paleness and IDs. That wouldn't make it any easier for Two to explain the sudden appearance of a never-mentioned and unrecorded identical twin.

Still gazing through the sphere's windows, Sarah Jane's ears perked up when the conversation took a turn. "Doctor," Linus said candidly, "Information Specialist Smith said all the alternates she visited were primitive. Her photos back that up. But it seems like you know rather more, not rather less, about these things than I do. How is that possible? Where are you from, really?"

"Oh, here and *then*," he replied coyly.

Linus's expression suggested he thought he'd misheard the man. When Linus looked to Sarah Jane she smiled and shrugged, letting him know he'd get no help from her direction.

"Shall we get back?" he asked. Linus led his guests back through the large underground utility conduit serving the sphere. It might have been the power of suggestion but the moment Linus proclaimed, "We should be about back under the dome," Sarah Jane would have sworn the tunnel grew 10 degrees warmer.

They exited the conduit into CosDiv headquarters. Sarah Jane knew Hampton Court Palace as an aging Tudor landmark originally built for Cardinal Woolsey. An attractive edifice, popular for school outings and package tours full of retired foreigners, but otherwise fading into the background of a city that practically sweated history. Here, however, the historic structure housed a facility that, even by Archology One standards, bordered on super-science. The Directorate had transformed Hampton Court into the heart of the project tapping N-Space energy and the nerve center controlling its hundred harvesting spheres and their thousands upon thousands of cosmic turbines.

When their host offered them the full tour, Sarah Jane was moderately curious. The Doctor, on the other hand, jumped at the opportunity. Within the pink brick edifice, ancient rooms and chambers had been converted into labs, offices, and storerooms serving scientists and technicians as well as legions of administrative and support personnel.

Far below the palace's high walls, narrow towers, and wide inner courtyards, a subterranean control chamber housed supercomputers crunching numbers and performing calculations necessary for CosDiv's spheres and cosmic turbines to harvest N-Space's latent energy. Other machines tracked and allocated the mind-boggling amounts of energy, transforming it into life-giving power. Even collectively, the computers occupied only a part of CosDiv's control chamber and generated a fraction of the noise and heat of their Base 5 counterpart back on Sarah Jane's home reality.

Around the supercomputers, desks held smaller machines that Linus called "terminals." Patched into the larger machines, a single terminal could control something as formidable

as operating the entire array of harvesting spheres or as delicate as realigning an individual cosmic turbine.

After completing their guided tour, Linus revealed an ulterior motive for bringing Sarah Jane and the Doctor to headquarters. He and Two hadn't been entirely alone in questioning the director's assertions that the alternates where empty and lifeless. And they'd had help in sending Two on her mission. Linus felt that two of their co-conspirators in particular deserved to see that risks they'd taken hadn't been in vain…and should meet the strange visitors to Archology One.

System Operator Thorne, a few years younger than Sarah Jane, supervised CosDiv's "information technology"—a term which seemed to encompass its computers and related devices. Thorne wore her hair short, save for a single long lock dangling in front of her eyes. Contrasting with the obvious importance of her responsibilities, Thorne's attire matched what Sarah Jane had come to associate with Archology One's manual rather than managerial classes.

Linus explained that he and Thorne had worked together to realign the cosmic turbine which made Two's journey possible. Just as importantly, Thorne kept the rest of the system from noticing the diverted turbine and, afterward, electronically covered their tracks.

Though even older the Doctor's apparent age, Custodian Herbert's short, thin frame hinted at enterprising vigor rather than frailty. In addition to dungarees, he donned a cloth cap; one of the few pieces of headgear Sarah Jane had seen in the Archology. The Custodian had assisted Linus and Two's scheme in "little ways" nobody seemed eager to specify. Given that it had been Herbert who procured bogus IdentiTags for Sarah Jane and the Doctor, she had some insight as to their general nature.

Thorne's manner was detached and clinical, projecting an air of implicit superiority Sarah Jane suspected might actually mask shyness and awkwardness. Beneath his gruff exterior, Herbert proved to be emotional and gregarious, peppering Sarah Jane with questions about her London and the other alternates she'd experienced.

Mindful of the time, and not wishing to linger so long at CosDiv headquarters that any individuals sympathetic to Director Goodkyne might grow curious about the two visitors, Linus declared their visit at an end.

Sarah Jane kept her silence on the journey back to Linus's ResPlan block, still absorbed, even awestruck, by Archology One's strangeness. She suspected the Doctor's erstwhile chess partner would approve that, in this radical variation on Sarah Jane's London, the few notes of familiarity felt more surreal than comforting. Hampton Court Palace and its gardens, of course. Westminster Abbey. The massive museum complex at Bloomsbury, surprisingly still called "the British Museum." The Globe Theatre, a massive video marquee outside confirming the Bard's works were alive and well in Archology One. On a grassy playing field, spectators watched athletic young men and women competing in a game of not-exactly-cricket.

Another point of commonality with her home could be heard as well as seen. Despite construction almost a

century after the Reasoncy's rise, a nearly identical Big Ben stood close by Directorate Headquarters. Though physically dwarfed by the surrounding ResPlan blocks and other structures, the noise from Big Ben's 17-ton great bell echoed through the domed archology hourly.

It had been more than just reflecting on those points of commonality with her London which led Sarah Jane to suggest getting take-away from one of Archology One's, fortunately plentiful, fish and chips shops. A hunch told her the texture of replicated whitefish might not be so jarringly different as synthesized beef. Once the package had been spread out on Linus's dining table, picking out the greasy protein and fried potatoes wrapped in old Information Services bulletins, Sarah Jane was happy to have her intuition confirmed.

"Your hospitality has been impeccable," the Doctor said, wiping his fingers on a serviette made of synthetic fabric. "And your world is fascinating. So much so that I admit I've rather let myself ignore that it's in the process of destroying Sarah's. And countless others. The critical juncture must be very near indeed. Do you have a plan?"

"Now that we have what didn't before," Linus explained, "proof that the alternates are real and are filled with people, I think we should arrange another meeting with Director Goodkyne. This time, we'll have Two's photos. And the both of you, of course."

"Oh, yes, you will come won't you?" Two said brightly.

So subtle most people would have missed it, a tiny twinge at the corner of the Doctor's mouth told Sarah Jane her friend was skeptical.

"If that doesn't work," Two continued. "We'll go down to the Information Services complex and make another unauthorized broadcast." Sarah Jane wondered if her double had also caught the Doctor's expression.

"Is that wise?" Linus asked Two. "You're already under censure for last time. You get caught doing something like that again…and you'll spend the rest of your career proofreading nutritional bulletins."

"I don't see we really have a choice. We have to have a backup plan. The Director has put his whole life into this, I'm not sure he's going to come at it with a rational head."

"Not to be a downer," Sarah Jane said, "but what if neither of those work?"

Linus gave a heavy sigh. "Then we take matters into our own hands. Shut the system down ourselves."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

With all three plans requiring preparation, Two and Linus departed to lay the groundwork, leaving Sarah Jane and the Doctor alone in the flat.

"Doctor, as much as Two and Linus have explained it," she admitted, "It is hard for me to believe it's really 1972. Everything's so different. How have they accomplished so much?"

The Doctor smiled sympathetically. "You know, Sarah, I've seen it all over the universe. From many different species. These sorts of meritocratic technocracies are very good at getting things done. What they're not good at is realizing whether a particular thing *should* be done. They excel at 'what' and even 'how,' but are rather hope-

less when it comes 'why.'"

Killing time until their hosts returned, and wanting to further satisfy her curiosity about Archology One, Sarah Jane reached for the handheld device controlling Scientist Venkatagiri's color television; an appliance of enormous length and width but so thin it could be called "flat." Flipping through the more than two-dozen channels it offered, she eventually settled on a production of *The Tempest*, finding comfort in a work created before this London and hers had diverged. It was also a safe bet with the Doctor, himself fond of the Bard. As they watched, Arthur napped behind Linus's couch.

"Good heavens, Sarah, that's Olivier playing Prospero!" The Doctor smiled, putting his nuanced eye to good use. And so it was.

It pleased Sarah Jane to discover Archology One was not ahead of her London by every measure. This *Tempest* resembled the broadcast of a stage play more than a film. This world's artists clearly had yet to unlock the medium's full potential.

Two returned, her expression somewhere between a genuine smile and a grimace. "We're all set up at Information Services," she announced. "I blocked out a broadcast studio for our use. And I even uploaded my images of the alternates from my daemon to the IS mainframe. So, in case we're pressed for time, everything is ready to go."

She joined Sarah Jane and the Doctor on the couch as they watched Shakespeare. Politely as possible, Sarah Jane shared the observation that, by her world's standards, the broadcast wasn't up to snuff.

Though frowning, Two nodded. "I believe that. What I saw of arts on the alternates was really striking. They had a power, a color, an intensity. Perhaps Archology One has lost a certain…" Two searched for the word which best fit. "Passion?"

Even with Archology One's aesthetic limitations, Olivier made the play's conclusion magnificent. The trio sat, engrossed, as Prospero rediscovered compassion, forgiving and freeing from their island captivity those whom he believed had wronged him. Though the sound of the door opening behind them broke the moment, Two smiled brightly.

"Linus must be back!" she and Sarah Jane exclaimed together even as the Doctor scowled in irritation at their latest tandem announcement. Events soon gave reason for the Time Lord's scowl to sour into a full frown.

Instead of Scientist Venkatagiri, two strangers burst into the flat. Even without their metallic, badge-like IdentiTags they had the ubiquitous look of enforcers. Auto-pistols strapped around their waists and truncheons held firmly in-hand confirmed that impression.

"I am Security Corporal Coughlin and this is Corporal Tompkins," the shorter man announced. With his crewcut and square jaw, Coughlin's head appeared made from right angles. "We have lawful orders for your detention under suspicion of conspiracy compromising the wellbeing of the Directorate and Archology One."

His partner's oval face and high, bald head caused Tompkins to resemble a giant thumb. "Unless you want a nice stunning, I suggest you come along quietly," the hulking thumb pro-

claimed, waving his truncheon to accentuate the point. Even sans his rather oxymoronic remark about "a nice stunning," Sarah Jane sensed his weapon wasn't quite a truncheon. Certainly, its loud hum proclaimed it to be something other than the standard issue item carried by her London's bobbies.

Briefly, Corporal Coughlin consulted an oversized daemon, its case silver rather than black. Looking up, he focused on Two. "Information Specialist Smith," he said to himself as if ticking items off a list. He paused "Where is Scientist Venkatagiri?"

"He's out," Two replied, which was true, before adding, "We don't know where he is," which was not.

Focusing in on Sarah Jane and the Doctor, Corporal Tompkins gave a low whistle. "Damn, Jack, look at those two. What's wrong with 'em?"

"Nothing is wrong with us," Sarah Jane protested. "And we're right here, you don't need to talk about us in third person."

"I don't rightly know, Tommy," Jack ignored her. "They look like folks from back before the Dimming."

If Sarah Jane and the Doctor surprised the security personnel, Arthur's sudden appearance from behind the couch absolutely alarmed them. Woken from his nap to find unknown humans again confronting Sarah Jane, he appeared to be in an ill temper. As Tompkins jumped back a full meter, Coughlin somehow managed to turn a shade paler. After a moment of nervous fumbling, both men drew their auto-pistols, pointing them at the horseshoe crab.

"Bloody hell," was all Coughlin could say.

"What is that thing, Jack?" Tomkins wanted to know.

"How should I know?"

"His name is Arthur," Sarah Jane shouted. "And he's harmless!"

"We better waste it." Tomkins ignored her. "Just to be safe."

Coughlin thought the matter over "Orders don't say one way or the other." When Tompkins remained insistent, he added "Tommy, you really want to scrub that thing and then find out the general wanted it alive?"

"It might have diseases, Jack."

"Fair point," his partner acknowledged.

"Those two might as well," Tompkins added, glowering suspiciously at Sarah Jane and the Doctor. "Maybe it's some sickness that makes 'em look like that."

"Better scan them, then."

As Coughlin covered them with his gun, Tompkins ran a cloth-tipped swab over Sarah Jane's skin before inserting the swab into a handheld device. After a moment the device made a chiming noise as a green light flashed on its exterior. He repeated the process with the Doctor and, running the swab over the horseshoe crab's carapace, Arthur. Each time the machine gave the same chime and green light.

"Well, whatever they are, they're clean at least," Tompkins announced.

"The next one of you who talks about me like I'm not here…" Sarah Jane began.

"Good thing, too," Coughlin spoke over her. "If they weren't, it's not like putting on our clean suits now would do us any good."

"I did warn you about using third person!" Sarah Jane said, smashing the heel of her shoe down onto Coughlin's

foot. She doubted he felt much of it through the thick synthetic leather of his boot. But, apparently, he felt enough. Yelping, Coughlin almost dropped his pistol. Perhaps someone with proper training could have seized the moment and turned the tables on the security men. Sarah Jane could hold her own in a scrap but knew she was no unarmed combat expert.

Proving she'd made the right call, in the time it took those thoughts to race through her mind, the corporal recovered…and appeared to be giving great consideration to introducing his stun truncheon to Sarah Jane's skull. Still, the act of defiance made her feel better, if only a little.

Tompkins looked from the strange-to-him faces of Sarah Jane and the Doctor to the understandably bizarre Arthur and back to his partner. "Jack, what do we do?"

"This is above our grade, Tommy. I'd best call the general." Security Corporal Coughlin raised the silver-cased daemon to his face. "It's Corporal Coughlin, ma'am," he spoke into the device. "We've got Information Specialist Smith but not Scientist Venkatagiri…

"And there are…complications."

"What do you mean 'complications?'" The muted voice answering from the daemon was female if not precisely feminine. And it stuck in Sarah Jane's mind. Though she couldn't place it, the cadence and inflection were maddeningly familiar.

"I don't rightly know where to begin," he admitted. "I think you'd better see for yourself."

"Very well, I'm on my way."

"General's on her way," Coughlin repeated after ending the call. "Let's get this lot packaged up."

As he and Tompkins advanced on Sarah Jane and company, Arthur took exception. Clicking aggressively and waving his forelegs in warning, the horseshoe crab intercepted the corporals. Rethinking his earlier decision, when Tompkins drew his auto-pistol, Coughlin quickly followed suit.

"Orders, men," the Doctor chastised them. "Remember you orders. How is your general going to react when she arrives and finds that you've destroyed a valuable specimen? I doubt she'll think you've done her any favors."

After the Doctor's reprimand, the security men hesitated. Taking initiative, Sarah Jane stood. Telling Arthur "It's okay" and stroking his carapace to calm him, she walked Arthur to Linus's bedroom and shut him in. From the other side, she heard Arthur continuing to click and scratch at the door with alarm. Briefly, she considered barricading herself inside as well. But since she didn't doubt the officers could break the door down, and doing so might provoke them to act rashly, there didn't seem to be any benefit in it.

Coughlin and Tomkins restrained their detainees. Instead of handcuffs, they used plastic strips that somehow folded into themselves and tightened around Sarah Jane's wrists. She thought there was a good chance the Doctor could break his restraints. The calculating look on his face told her the Time Lord entertained similar thoughts and wondered if this was an opportune moment to do so. Apparently, he resolved to wait and see how the situation played out.

The corporals searched their pris-

oners, relieving them of them of anything dangerous or unusual. In addition to her sharpened pipe fragment, they took the Doctor's sonic screwdriver. To Sarah Jane's considerable consternation, they also removed her camera. True, she had long since shot every roll of film she carried. But it still felt like adding insult to injury.

"Aren't we entitled to counsel? Or a phone call? Or something?" Sarah Jane demanded.

"We'll be assigned a defense advocate from Legal Services. Eventually." Two explained.

"That's good." Sarah Jane put on her brave face.

"I wouldn't get your hopes up," her double replied before they sank into awkward silence.

A quarter-hour later the flat's door opened, revealing a woman projecting the unmistakable aura of command. Short, dark hair framed her stoic features and observant eyes while her curiously aristocratic bearing seemed at odds with Archology One's classless meritocracy. She struck Sarah Jane as, somehow, both strange and familiar.

From the doorway, she surveyed the situation inside the flat with not quite concealed irritation before focusing on Sarah Jane and the Doctor. "I'm General First-Grade Alicia Lethbridge-Stewart. Who the blazes are you two?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

"The Brigadier is a woman?" Sarah Jane blurted out.

"Don't be impolite," the Doctor whispered.

"Like I told you, ma'am, we've got Smith," Corporal Coughlin reiterated to Lethbridge-Stewart. "But not the other one."

"And we don't know who these two are," Tompkins chimed in, indicating Sarah Jane and the Doctor. "Or why they look like that."

"The 'complications' you mentioned, I presume?" She arched an eyebrow.

"Yes, ma'am," Coughlin answered.

"Have they given any accounting of themselves?"

"No ma'am," he replied, before warily looking at Sarah Jane. "And, fair warning, that one doesn't like to be referred to like that."

With a sidelong glance, the general acknowledged scratching noises from behind the bedroom door. "And what's in there? A dog?"

"Not even. Some kind of giant bug. Don't know how to describe it, ma'am. Prepare yourself." As Coughlin covered him and Lethbridge-Stewart rolled her eyes, Tompkins opened the door. Even the general startled at the horseshoe crab angrily brandishing his forelegs. "Has it been scanned for pathogens?" she asked, quickly recovering her composure.

"Yes, general. It's clean. All three of them are clean."

"Please, don't hurt Arthur," Sarah Jane pled, throwing her bound arms around the horseshoe crab.

"Arthur?" The general asked in disbelief. As her eyes traveled back and forth between Sarah Jane and Arthur, her face softened a bit. "Very well. For now. But see that you keep it in line.

"Outside!" The general ordered her corporals without bothering to look at them. Deflated by their casual dismissal, Coughlin and Tompkins slunk from the flat like chastised dogs.

"So," the general looked at Two,

"these are your guests from the alternates, as you call them?"

"How do you know that?" asked the shocked Two.

"Information Specialist Smith, I regret to inform you that I am not entirely dim. Given their appearance, these two people are either from some other time or some other place. Having read the dossiers of Scientist Venkatagiri and yourself and being acquainted with the details of your…interesting… unauthorized broadcast, I can reasonably conclude the later."

"Are you also Sarah Jane Smith?" the general turned to Two's doppelganger.

"I am."

"And are you an information specialist as well?"

"I'm a journalist," Sarah Jane responded.

"A journalist is like an…" Two began.

"I know what a journalist is," Lethbridge-Stewart snapped. "I read history while at the Archology Security College at Seaford House." She turned her attention to the other stranger. "And you?"

"I'm the Doctor," he answered.

A follow-up question died on the general's lips, as if intuiting additional inquiry might prove more trouble that it was worth.

"How did you find us?" Two wanted to know.

"When you disappeared after your broadcast, Information Specialist Smith, I concluded you'd likely gone underground. And I could not afford to rule out the possibility you intended some act of sabotage against CosDiv. I had your flat placed under observation and your daemon's activity monitored. Director Goodkyne, on the other hand, had the ridiculous notion you might try to reach your so-called alternates. Not so ridiculous after all, it seems.

"Then your daemon went active again after so long in dark mode. I knew you hadn't been to your flat. Logically, there was only one other place you could be."

"What happens to us now?" Two asked. "Off to Detention Block?"

"Hardly," Lethbridge-Stewart's face suggested she found her options unlovely. "I've no good way to explain the singular appearances of your companions. Even if one of them otherwise appears to be your twin sister. *Especially* if one of them appears to be your twin sister," the general corrected herself. "And I certainly don't want to have to justify why they're not in the system. So, we're going to visit Director Goodkyne."

That pleased Sarah Jane. After all, it's what Linus and Two had been working toward anyway. "A nice chat." She brightened. "Just the thing to clear matters up."

"Well, I didn't quite say that," the general said, sounding for all the world like her counterpart back in Sarah Jane's Britain.

After Coughlin and Tompkins ensured the hallways were clear, General First-Grade Lethbridge-Stewart escorted Sarah Jane, Two, the Doctor, and Arthur to the lift. It took Sarah Jane a moment to realize they headed upward not down.

Gardens and an open area with tables and chairs made of cheerless white plastic occupied most of the roof. But at one edge was a small, flat space, like a car park, occupied by one

of the flying vehicles Sarah Jane had observed on reaching Archology One. Upon closer inspection, it resembled an aerodynamic van with horizontal turbofans where wheels would have been on a terrestrial vehicle.

As the general produced a black object about the size of a matchbox from her shirt pocket, the vehicle chirped. A long door along one side slid open as a second door raised at the vehicle's rear. "Can you get your creature in there?" Lethbridge-Stewart asked Sarah Jane, indicating the small cargo space in back.

"Come on, Arthur," Sarah Jane said, sitting on the vehicle's rear bumper. "Hop up!" With Arthur's multitude of legs, the horseshoe crab had little difficulty scrambling inside.

Lethbridge-Stewart couldn't quite suppress a look of wonderment. "He really is trained, isn't he?"

"I told you," Sarah Jane announced proudly.

"And they're common in your world?" the general asked after carefully checking Coughlin and Tompkins were beyond earshot.

"Heavens, no. I found Arthur on a world with no people. We hunted giant eels together."

Lethbridge-Stewart had no reply for that.

The open side door revealed a compact cockpit and three rows of seats. As the corporals helped their detainees into the craft and took positions behind them, the general slid behind the craft's controls.

"You pilot your own daedaloid?" Tomkins asked, taking a second to remember to add, "Ma'am."

"Corporal, would you trust someone who couldn't handle a mundane task like flying her own daedaloid with the responsibility of command?"

"No, ma'am," he replied sheepishly.

"Good. I hope it's a lesson you'll retain throughout your career."

The daedaloid rose slowly from the roof before flying away at rapidly increasing speed. From inside, the machine seemed to float in eerie silence through Archology One's skyline. The general flipped a switch, activating a bank of flashing blue lights atop the craft.

General First-Grade Lethbridge-Stewart smoothly merged her daedeloid into the streams of traffic plying well-defined routes over the city through artificial canyons created by its vast buildings. Seeing the security lights of the general's vehicle, other traffic made way for them. They passed so close to giant video screens broadcasting Directorate news and information to the populace that Sarah Jane felt like she had front row seats at the cinema.

Through the daedaloid's curved windscreen one object rapidly grew larger, eclipsing all others. The enormous needle-like tower at Archology One's heart. Directorate Headquarters.

Unlike Linus's ResPlan block, with its tiny landing pad, Directorate HQ apparently saw frequent airborne visitors. Three separate tiers of landing pads ringed the tower's exterior spaced about 50 stories apart. Touching down on the topmost pad, the general and her men unloaded the detainees. Guards snapped to attention as Lethbridge-Stewart led her party through sliding doors into the heart of Archology One's defining institution.

Directorate HQ's upper levels were a masterpiece of marble and steel minimalism. Sarah Jane and company found themselves in the highest office of the city's highest building. She had the notion that, absent the room's massive window, she could reach outside and brush her fingertips across the dome. The office belonged to a man who not only figuratively but literally oversaw everything that happened in Archology One.

As he looked at them from behind his desk of black marble veined with white, Sarah Jane saw that Terrance Goodkyne had once been handsome. Even at advanced middle age, he remained striking, with platinum hair raising to a pronounced widow's peak and pale blue irises rendered all the more impressive by the vast, dark pupils they encircled. His thin, athletic physique made him appear even taller than his considerable height. The few lines etched into his face suggested wisdom rather than weariness.

Surveying the group in front of him, Director Goodkyne's gaze focused on Alicia Lethbridge-Stewart. "Where is the scientist?"

"He has not yet surfaced. My subordinates continue searching. But I thought it efficient to bring them to you piecemeal rather than waiting for complete set," she replied with a hint of pique.

"Mmm," the director's response was non-committal as he turned attention to Two. "And what do you have to say for yourself, Information Specialist Smith?"

"We've got proof the alternates are inhabited," Two gushed. "This is the Doctor. That's Arthur. And this, Director Goodkyne, is also Sarah Jane Smith. My double from another world! Can you believe it?"

"It may be as you say," the director acknowledged. "Rigorous study will be required to verify those claims. But, even if true, it hardly constitutes proof of the 'alternate dimensions teeming with life' you and Scientist Venkatagiri claimed in your pirate broadcast which threatened public order."

"How many other Archology Ones, how many Londons…if we use the old terminology, are out there?" As General Lethbridge-Stewart inserted herself into the conversation, the director's face assumed a peevish cast, as if irritated that she'd spoken.

"Conservatively?" The Doctor answered. "A million. The actual number is probably many orders of magnitude above that."

"And how many people live in them?" the general wanted to know.

"I'd say a million people per London is a good average. Any London where an industrial revolution hits tends to get big," the Doctor replied. "Not big by Archology One standards, I'll grant you," he added as an afterthought.

The general's eyes drilled into the Doctor's, as if accessing his credibility. Giving no hint of her conclusions, she continued. "A million cities with a million inhabitants? That's a trillion people."

"Most places, yes," the Doctor replied enigmatically.

"General Lethbridge-Stewart, I appreciate your enthusiasm," Director Goodkyne sought to regain control of the conversation. "But we have no evidence for that assertion other than the word of this supposed alien. Kindly limit your concerns to the security di-

mensions of this matter and leave the remainder to me."

"Two has other proof, too," Sarah Jane interjected. "Show him your photos," she nudged her double. With wrists bound, it took considerable effort for Two to produce her daemon. Director Goodkyne took the device in long, elegant hands that seemed more appropriate for a sculptor, maestro, or stage conjurer. Sarah Jane wondered which of those best characterized the master of Archology One.

As Goodkyne swiped from image to image, Two narrated her adventures. Sarah Jane, of course, had heard it before but enjoyed Two's now more polished rendition. Even Lethbridge-Stewart could not conceal fascination, cut with alarm. The director's statue-like face and cool, placid eyes allowed no guess as to what went on behind them.

As soon as Two concluded her presentation, Terrance Goodkyne raised the daemon in his hands. Bringing it crashing down onto his marble desk, the device shattered into pieces. No one said a word.

"Has it occurred to you, Information Specialist Smith," though the director's face remained calm, his voice was icily venomous, "that I do not wish the harvesting of cosmic energy stopped? Has it occurred to you that what you propose means the death of every person on this planet? You know what happened to Archology Four. And what almost happened at Archology Eleven. If we shut down the spheres, then that will happen to all of us."

"But what about what the Doctor said?" Sarah Jane and Two asked together.

"An unverified, and perhaps conveniently unverifiable, assertion." The director dismissed the point with a wave of his hand. "Even if true, it is irrelevant. Archology One requires that energy to survive."

"Your whole society is supposed to be based on reason," Sarah Jane countered. "Is it reasonable to sacrifice a trillion lives for a hundred million?"

"Of course," Director Goodkyne asserted confidently. "Nothing is more rational that the drive for self-preservation. And, besides, I am not about to be lectured on reason by some barbarian from another world."

Sarah Jane protested. "You can't have it both ways by dismissing me as 'a barbarian from another world' after saying that Two and the Doctor's assertions are unverifiable."

Called out on the inherent contradiction of his statements, irritation flickered across the director's face.

"You see, Sarah?" The Doctor observed with more than a trace of smugness "That's the problem with building a society solely on 'reason.' It eventually founders on the question of what's reasonable." Sarah Jane knew her companion well enough to understand he was baiting the director. Whether or not that was wise, it worked.

"The matter is settled." Raising his voice, Director Goodkyne showed real agitation for the first time during their encounter. "Archology One will be preserved. The harvesting of cosmic energy will continue. I do not doubt that the archology's citizens would support me in this. And general, I want Scientist Venkatagiri, and any other conspirators, apprehended and brought to me…what is the old phrase…dead

or alive."

Lethbridge-Stewart snapped to a smart salute. "I understand my orders. In the meantime, what shall I do with these two and their pet?"

"Nothing. I will detain them here at Directorate HQ until we can be certain all threats to CosDiv and the harvesting spheres have been dealt with."

"That is irregular, Director." The corners of the general's mouth curled into the faintest hint of a frown. "Not procedure at all."

"This is an irregular situation, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, but…"

"Do I need to remind you who is the director here? And who is the general?"

Again, Lethbridge-Stewart saluted. This time, Sarah Jane thought, with rather more reluctance than before.

Accompanied by a security detachment, Director Goodkyne and General Lethbridge-Stewart escorted the prisoners to a secure storeroom. "No, not procedure at all," the general spoke under her breath upon viewing the tiny, cluttered space which would house the prisoners for an undefined period, earning her a scathing glance from Goodkyne.

"Find Scientist Venkatagiri. And anyone assisting him in whatever schemes these dissidents are hatching," the director commanded her. "Then we can decide what to do with them."

With that, the director, general, and their security departed. The automatic door slid shut behind them with quiet finality, leaving Sarah Jane, the Doctor, Two, and Arthur alone in the room. "Well, that could have gone better," Two admitted, taking an uncomfortable seat on a low wire shelf.

"At least the general doesn't seem so bad," Sarah Jane opined.

"Indeed," the Doctor concurred. "It appears a Lethbridge-Stewart by another name…"

"The director, on the other hand," Sarah Jane moaned. "There's someone I think would do absolutely anything to get what he wants." Though the temperature was mild, she shivered as her mind assembled facts. Stashing them in a storeroom suggested the director didn't have a long term plan for them. And if so methodical and meticulous an individual as Terrance Goodkyne didn't have a long term plan for them…it could only be because they didn't feature in his long term.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Seeing the grim set of the Doctor's mouth and jaw, Sarah Jane knew his thoughts tracked hers. By her despondent expression, so did Two's. Again, hardly surprising since, on some level, she and Sarah Jane were the same person. Only Arthur, enthusiastically rolling around a plastic bucket of cleaning fluid he'd turned on its side, remained oblivious.

"Do you really think the Director is capable of that?" Sarah Jane asked, hoping someone would argue against her instincts. As the Doctor looked away, Two's face suggested she knew the answer. No, she and Sarah Jane weren't *quite* the same person. Fumbling behind her back, Sarah Jane tried to locate the sharpened bit of ceramic pipe, only to remember that the general's men had taken it from her back at Linus's flat.

"Look on the bright side, Sarah, it

may not even come to that," the Doctor said with a gallows grin. "Without the TARDIS's computation power I can't tell you the zero hour but, just based on some quick mental calculation, the critical event is only hours away. Certainly no more than a day. By the time Director Goodkyne gets around to disposing of us, either Archology One may already be the 'real' London or a probability collapse will result in no Londons at all and space-time writing us out of existence entirely."

"Doctor," Two observed. "You've got a strange notion of 'bright side.'"

Standing, Sarah Jane leaned against a metal filing cabinet. Rubbing her plastic restraints against its edges, she hoped to whittle the bonds away.

"No time for subtlety, Sarah," the Doctor announced, snapping his restraints by twisting his wrists apart. Freeing Sarah Jane and Two took rather longer. Pulling on their wrists could lead to sprains or even fractures, so he had to settle for a more awkward grip on the thin plastic bands themselves.

Shaking her now free hands to get circulation going, Two, who had shown nothing but affection for the Doctor, suddenly regarded him apprehensively. Sarah Jane's double had clearly worked out he wasn't quite the gentle, harmless elder he appeared.

"No," Sarah Jane confirmed her suspicious. "But he is as good a friend as you can ever hope for."

Apparently satisfied, Two turned to more pressing matters. "We're free of our restraints but not of this room. How do we get out of here?"

They examined the automated doors of galvanized steel which imprisoned them. Unlike in films, there was no convenient control panel to jimmy open. Nor, even with the Doctor's strength, could their combined efforts budge the portal. "I wish Lethbridge-Stewart's men had left my sonic screwdriver," the Doctor groaned as he strained against the door. Getting nowhere, they took a break to recover their energy and consider their options.

"Doctor!" Sarah Jane cried excitedly as the door opened. Her enthusiasm trailed off realizing it hadn't been the result of their efforts. Before the door shut again, two grim-faced security officers stepped through. The muscular woman favored the same crewcut as Corporal Coughlin. Her large companion was plain-looking save for his large, akimbo nose which testified to a break which never properly healed.

Unpleasant as her encounter with Coughlin and Tompkins had been, the corporals had been straight-forward and professional, like UNIT personnel or the law enforcement she was familiar with back home. This new pair radiated a furtiveness and stony coolness Sarah Jane did not care for. Their short exchange while affixing noise suppressors to their auto-pistols confirmed Sarah Jane's worst fears.

"They've got free," Broken Nose stated the obvious.

"All the better," his partner replied. "We won't have to lie about 'shot while trying to escape.'"

"Why are you going to shoot us? On whose authority?" Sarah Jane demanded. Suspecting she knew the answer, she wanted confirmation all the same. More importantly, she needed to distract them as the Doctor gradually shifted into position to attack. Hopefully, dealing with her obstinacy and

indignation, they'd ignore the "old man."

"We're not authorized to tell you that."

"If you're going to kill us anyway what does it matter?" Sarah Jane argued.

Crewcut shrugged as she and her partner looked at each other. "Nothing personal," Broken Nose said. "But you're loose ends the director can't afford to leave around." As they raised their guns, Sarah Jane wondered how many evils had been committed with the explanation, "nothing personal."

Though the Doctor had positioned himself to strike, it was Arthur who took the offensive. Opening fire on the angry arthropod, the officers' slugs sunk into his thick shell, seemingly doing no real harm but further enraging him.

"Aim for its face," Crewcut yelled, her cool obviously shaken. Clearly, this hadn't been part of her briefing.

"No! Arthur!" Sarah Jane shouted as Crewcut and Broken Nose lowered their weapons to shoot at Arthur's head.

Perhaps it was the panic in Sarah Jane's voice or the discomfort caused by bullets sticking in his shell but, as the horseshoe crab's furious clicking reached a crescendo, a blue nimbus appeared around Arthur's carapace. Sarah Jane caught a whiff of ozone followed by a loud crack as sparks erupted from him. Thrown back, the security officers bounced off the wall and splayed across the ground, stunned. Broken Nose's legs twitched, wracked by involuntary muscular contractions.

Arthur, it seemed, was electric.

"Good boy!" Sarah Jane said. As she wrapped her arms around the animal, Arthur's agitated clicking changed to a contented purr.

"Good boy, indeed," the Doctor acknowledged as he and Two turned out the guards' pockets.

"This is what we're looking for," Two proclaimed, holding up a small keypad. "It'll take time, but we'll get out."

"If you'll pass it over, I can get us out faster," the Doctor said. "With a few tweaks, it will cycle through combinations automatically." The Time Lord was still rewiring the device when the door opened again.

"Swine!" Alicia Lethbridge-Stewart seethed, surveying the scene inside the room.

"It's not our fault!" Sarah Jane protested. "Arthur was protecting us from them."

The general's weary expression conveyed that wasn't who she'd meant. She knew the score. "I came back to give you the chance to talk me into letting you go, but this…" She glanced at the incapacitated assassins. "…makes my decision for me. I will never let it be said that a Lethbridge-Stewart permitted a million cities to die on her watch. Even if no one remains alive in Archology One to say it.

"Well, hop to it," the general continued after taking a moment to shake off that last thought, "We've got harvesting spheres to take down."

"General, I hate to be a wet blanket," Two interjected. "but I doubt we can do that without Linus, I mean Scientist Venkatagiri."

"I expect you're right," the general replied. "Fortunately, I apprehended him before I paid a call on all of you."

"You didn't tell the director that," Sarah Jane's double exclaimed.

"Nor, you will note, did I explicitly deny it," she responded gruffly. "Information Specialist Smith, do I need to repeat my comment about not being entirely dim? The years have given me ample reason to question Terrance Goodkyne's motives. I wanted at least one card still face down when we went into our meeting with him."

"Can we even get out of here?" Sarah Jane wondered. "Can the four of us—five of us," she corrected, accounting for Arthur's newly revealed talents, "fight our way out of Directorate HQ?"

"Doubtful," Lethbridge-Stewart posited. "But I don't think it will come to that. Director Goodkyne is many things, a fool is not one of them. It's unlikely that he made his orders to kill you public knowledge. People will simply see the General of the Security Division escorting detainees. Still, we'd better act the role. If you'll permit the indignity?" She asked, holding up a handful of the plastic restraining bands.

Lethbridge-Stewart's prediction proved correct. No one they encountered on their way back to her daedaloid questioned the general about her actions. Reaching her flyer, Lethbridge-Stewart produced a blade from a device resembling a complicated descendant of the trusty Swiss Army knife. Cutting Two's bonds and passing her the tool, Sarah Jane's doppelganger freed the others.

Before taking off, Lethbridge-Stewart returned the various items her corporals had relieved them of at Linus's flat.

"Where is Scientist Venkatagiri?" Two and Sarah Jane chorused in unison as Directorate Headquarters receded in the distance behind them.

"Do you have any idea how irritating that is?" General Lethbridge-Stewart asked the pair.

"Yes," the Doctor replied, more acerbically than Sarah Jane thought necessary. "Yes, I do."

"To answer your question," the general continued, "I put your scientist the one place in all of Archology One that I consider absolutely safe. My office at the old Defense Divison HQ."

They descended toward a massive Regency-era, or rather Reasoncy-era, fortress where Kensington Gardens should have been. With a gentle touch, Lethbridge-Stewart sat her daedaloid down atop an old tower converted into a landing pad. Motioning for the others to follow, she led them down a narrow spiral staircase.

As their footfalls echoed over the ancient hardwood floor of the building's interior, Sarah Jane stole quick glances at oil paintings and photos hanging above the dark wainscoting: images chronicling the history of this distant cousin to the British Army. Archology One's General Lethbridge-Stewart clearly shared aesthetic sensibilities with her counterpart from Sarah Jane's world.

There was nothing quaint about the thick metal door to Lethbridge-Stewart's office. Producing a remote keypad of her own, the formidable barrier slid ajar. Inside, Linus paced pensively across a massive Persian rug. Looking up, he smiled as he saw Two and the others.

At the back of the room, a gray-muzzled black spaniel slowly rose

from his blanket in a wicker basket. Taking a moment to shake the stiffness from his joints, the dog rushed enthusiastically toward the general. Until noticing Arthur. Face to face, only centimeters apart, the dog was as strange to Arthur as the giant arthropod was to the general's pet. As the spaniel growled and sniffed at the horseshoe crab, Arthur clicked uneasily. After their short standoff, each apparently concluded the other to be benign. As Arthur settled down, the spaniel trotted happily to Lethbridge-Stewart's side.

"There's a good boy, Wellington," she said, ruffling his ears and neck affectionately. "Did you miss Mummy?" Suddenly remembering she had company, Lethbridge-Stewart straightened herself, awkward at being caught in an obvious display of affection. "Yes, to business, then," she proclaimed to her guests.

Not everyone was ready to begin. As Two and Linus continued their long embrace, relieved to be reunited, Sarah Jane felt a touch of envy. And, with the scientist's fine features and sensitive eyes, to say nothing of his brilliant mind and tender disposition, she certainly understood the appeal.

Waiting for them to finish, Sarah Jane raised a private matter with her friend. "Doctor, I don't like it."

"Don't like what, Sarah?"

"When we turn the taps off on the N-Space energy, then Two, Linus, the General and everyone is else in Archology One is going to die. And not right away, slowly. Once their energy reserves run out, they'll freeze and they'll starve. You know, the director is likely right about one thing. Not everyone is as noble as our friends. Most of Archology One likely would be against what we're doing."

"I know, Sarah," the Doctor admitted. "But what choice do we have? It's this London…or all the others. Or maybe none of them at all."

"Binary thinking?" Sarah Jane retorted. "I'd expect that from a machine intelligence. But I'd hope for better from a Time Lord. Or even a human. There has to be another way."

"N-Space energy is the only power source that provides the immense power they require. And they've no space program to speak of. So we can't get them to another planet."

"Doctor," Sarah Jane said suddenly. "What if it wasn't another planet? At least not exactly."

"What do you mean, Sarah?"

"The Einstein-Rosen Bridges. The tunnels between realities."

"What about them?"

Overhearing their conversation, Two caught Sarah Jane's drift. "If rerouting just one turbine of one sphere sent me to the alternates, what if we rerouted CosDiv's entire output to a single alternate?"

"Could we move everybody there?" Sarah Jane and Two asked together.

"Sorry, Doctor," Sarah Jane apologized. "I know you asked us not to do that."

"In all my life, I've never been happier to have a request flouted," the Doctor smiled.

Linus nodded in eager agreement. "That's an idea with potential." He and the Doctor exploded into the kind of intensely technical conversation that, no matter how much rode on its outcome, Sarah Jane had grown quite bored with since meeting a dragon on the M4. Watching the general sit in a

chair behind her desk as she stroked Wellington's thick fur, Sarah Jane realized it was the same chair that her Lethbridge-Stewart kept at Base 5.

"A dog?" Sarah Jane asked. "Your people don't use animals for food, so I would have thought pets were right out as well."

"Journalist Smith, we're measurers, not monsters." Lethbridge-Stewart sounded aghast. "The scant resources consumed by a dog or cat are more than justified by their psychological benefits. The increased productivity, high morale, reduced absenteeism, and so forth." To Sarah Jane's ears, it sounded more like than a rationalization than an explanation. Apparently not even the Reasoncy's pragmatism could dent Britons' longstanding affection for their animals.

"And it seems we're hardly alone at that." The general looked at Arthur. "Your animal, whatever he is. How smart are they?"

"I haven't quite pegged that yet," she admitted. "Not as much as chimp, I think. But at least as much as a dog or cat. Perhaps a bit more."

"The math checks out," Linus excitedly interrupted their conversation. "The spheres' cosmic energy could be used to create a massive, persistent tunnel from Archology One to an alternate. At least theoretically."

"And there's an additional benefit," the Doctor added. "It buys us time. The regular, unidirectional flow of quantum energy across an Einstein-Rosen bridge is not nearly as damaging to N-Space as the chaotic turbulance the harvesting spheres normally cause. That should push back the critical event by hours, maybe even or day two." Quiet for a moment, he gazed into the distance. "But now comes the hard question. Who do we sacrifice?"

Seeing nobody followed, he continued. "Transporting a society like Archology One to someplace inhabited by less technologically advanced people? Sarah, you know how that's played out in your world. And I've seen how it's played out across the universe. True, it's our least bad option. But I don't fancy having to choose."

"There's another possibility. We know of at least one earth that is habitable but uninhabited. By people, anyway," Sarah Jane volunteered, looking at Arthur.

"Hmm," the Doctor pondered her idea. "A society as efficient as Archology One might *not* totally devastate the ecosystem of Arthur's world."

"I'm not thrilled about the idea, either," Sarah Jane protested, one hand instinctively reaching out to stroke the horseshoe crab's shell. "But, as you say, it's our least bad option."

"There's a problem," Linus frowned, "Arthur's world is not one where you two took readings. We don't have eleven-dimensional coordinates needed to establish a stable bridge to it."

"Let me worry about that," the Doctor replied. "Sarah's friend can help us. As long as he will part with a bit of his shell." Using the sonic screwdriver, the Doctor carved off a thumbnail-sized bit of Arthur's carapace. Holding it up against the light, it appeared translucent as the Doctor studied it. "Arthur's subatomic particles carry a quantum signature of the universe that produced them. It will take time, but my instruments can tease out that signature and retro-

engineer the eleven-dimensional coordinates of his world."

"This is wonderful," Linus gushed. "With another option for saving Archology One, Director Goodkyne can back down."

"I don't know, Linus," Two said. "I know you think you know him. But you didn't see him at our last meeting."

"Even if it's no longer a matter of life or death, relocating 100 million people and enough technology to make their society run is a herculean task," Sarah Jane expanded on her double's sentiments. "especially when you've got to do it while your energy reserves last. The Director doesn't seem like somebody likely to put himself out on others' behalf."

"It may go beyond that," Two volunteered. "Remember when he spoke about 'self-preservation'? I wonder if it was only Archology One's preservation that he meant. Terrance Goodkyne has been the most ruthless, autocratic director in Reasoncy history. Were the immediate danger posed by the Dimming removed, people might think differently about how he's used the power he's concentrated in his hands. There could be an inquiry. And I suspect the director would not fare well. He may have concerns about personal preservation as well."

"All that's chaff to the wheat. We have a plan. Let's get moving," Lethbridge-Stewart urged. Sarah Jane recognized the tone from her Brigadier. There had been talk enough, time had come for action.

"True, true," the Doctor agreed. "The clock is counting down on a universe of Londons."

"That is right enough, but not what I meant," the general clarified. "If Information Specialist Smith is correct, and I believe she is, Director Goodkyne will do everything in his power to stop us. We need to prepare CosDiv for a siege."

"That shouldn't be a problem. You run the Security Division," Two observed. "Who else can the director call on?"

"I wish it were that simple," Lethbridge-Stewart's expression was pained. "You were just a girl at the time, you might not even remember. But one of Goodkyne's first acts as director was to consolidate the Internal Security and Defense Divisions into a single Security Division. 'Streamlining resources,' he said. But it had the effect of making Defense a minority within our own organization. And since then, he's continued to pack it with his people. There aren't many I really trust anymore. A couple hundred, tops."

"Isn't there anyone else?" Sarah Jane asked.

"Not really. Even were there help to be had, the director will soon have Archology One on lockdown. If he doesn't already. And it's not like we can go beyond the dome."

"You're thinking four-dimensionally, general," the Doctor observed. "You need to think in eleven-dimensions. No, we can't get outside of your dome but we can get out of your universe."

"The TARDIS?" Sarah Jane said excitedly.

The Doctor shook his head. "I'm afraid not, though that would be the superior option. But I need the Old Girl to make the calculations necessary for creating an accurate bridge to Ar-

thur's world. However, we can send you out to the alternates the same way Linus sent Two out. And, now that we know a little bit more, we can use a tiny bit of the system's power for you and whatever help you can find to return directly to Archology One.

"There is one limiting factor," the Doctor added. "Because we're not using the TARDIS, to ensure targeting is precise we have to send you to one of the Londons where we took proper readings."

"That's fine," Sarah Jane smiled. "I know just where to go."

"This is an excellent idea." Linus grinned. "In addition to bringing reinforcements, we can use it as a proof of concept for establishing a bridge between realities."

"Wonderful," Sarah Jane's voice suggested she felt it was anything but. "I cannot tell you how happy I am to be a 'proof of concept.'"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In the bowels of CosDiv headquarters, the project's specialists scrambled to realign its thousands upon thousands of cosmic turbines. Above them, in the main courtyard of what had been Hampton Court Palace, Sarah Jane leaned against the daedaloid, joined by the Doctor and Lethbridge-Stewart. They watched Gwawl, son of Gwastad, drilling his 160 sworn soldiers. The juxtaposition of the general's high-tech flyer with the Celts' bolt action rifles and steel swords epitomized everything that simultaneously disoriented and dazzled Sarah Jane about traveling through the wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey.

"What do you think?" Sarah Jane asked the general. Clutching the composite-ceramic helmet Lethbridge-Stewart had given her, the military headgear felt unnatural in her hands. "Did I choose well?"

"Their kit isn't up to Archology One standards." Understatement was apparently a universal Lethbridge-Stewart trait. "But their prowess is impressive and, as we used to say, your chaps look like they know what it's about. I imagine we'll find a way to fit them in. Not, of course, that we have the luxury of choice."

Sarah Jane understood the general's last statement was in earnest. Upon returning to Archology One across the Einstein-Rosen bridge, her companions informed her that their collective expectations had proved correct. The promise of an empty world to settle hadn't swayed Director Goodkyne. With neither side willing to yield, it would come down to a fight. Not a Battle of London but a Battle for All Londons.

Given her choice of eleven worlds to search for reinforcements, Sarah Jane had not hesitated. She immediately thought of the brave and battle-hardened warrior they'd met in Boudicca's London, with warriors at his beck and call. And, speaking of beck and call, everything about their first encounter suggested Gwawl would be at Sarah Jane's. Indeed, upon returning to his world and locating the chieftain, she got no further than, "I need you and your rifles" before he took a knee and pledged himself to whatever service she required.

The rest of their conversation proved more complicated. Worldviews crashed together as Sarah Jane tried to explain her need. If she understood correctly, Gwawl now believed Sarah

Jane and her companions to be Seelie Fairies who wanted him to come to the Otherworld with his soldiers to battle the Unseelie. Crossing the Einstein-Rosen bridge and seeing Archology One, unbelievable enough to Sarah Jane, did nothing to dissuade Gwawl he had arrived in a magical realm of beings whose powers were more than natural.

As Sarah Jane continued watching their new arrivals drill, Lethbridge-Stewart excused herself to inspect the sentries and sharpshooters she'd posted atop the walls and roof of Hampton Court Palace.

"Shouldn't you be down in the control chamber helping Linus?" Sarah Jane asked the Doctor.

"Our friend has things well in hand for the moment. I'll join him in a bit. But it occurred to me I don't know when I'll next be able to get some fresh air. So I thought I'd check on you."

Commotion rose along the palace walls above. "Doctor. Journalist Smith," Lethbridge-Stewart called down to them "You may want to get up here. Company has come calling."

Sarah Jane and the Doctor were lucky to reach the top safely. With childlike enthusiasm, Gwawl and his followers rushed up the stairs to glimpse their mysterious foe, very nearly knocking off Sarah Jane and the Time Lord. Beyond the walls, soldiers to all appearances identical to Lethbridge-Stewart's troops descended on Hampton Court Palace. Not dozens or hundreds but thousands of them.

Lethbridge-Stewart produced a set of electronic binoculars, "oculars" she called them, before passing a second pair to Sarah Jane and explaining their use. Peering through them was like looking into a pair of televisions combining to create a three-dimensional image which the device could magnify or filter various ways.

Marching in long columns and well-ordered lines, aside from their metallic jumpsuits and auto-rifles, they resembled something from the Napoleonic Wars. A few soldiers carried heavier weapons. Flamers, like the flamethrowers of Sarah Jane's world, minus the cumbersome fuel tanks. And rocket launchers, sporting a quartet of rockets arranged in a diamond formation.

Eight armored personal carriers and scores of open-topped utility vehicles rolled alongside the infantry. Unfortunately, there was nothing Napoleonic about the APCs' thick armor or roof-mounted guns. Nor about the four daedaloids circling overhead. More combat-oriented than Lethbridge-Stewart's personal transport, autocannons protruded from their rounded noses while pods of rockets cradled beneath stubby wings.

Rolling up behind the APCs, its treads squeaking loudly all the way, was a massive tank.

"Wherever did the director find that ogre?" Lethbridge-Stewart wondered.

"Some museum somewhere?" one of her officers guessed.

Sarah Jane could see it was an old thing, made long before this world's present. She didn't know Archology One's historical context, but it looked like something that could have rolled across the desert at El Alamein or the rough forests of the Ardennes.

Almost against her better judgement, Sarah Jane compared the Direc-

torate's forces with what her side had managed to muster. A single APC, protected by a hastily raised earthen berm, parked just beyond the main gate. Around it, four platoons of infantry sheltered in foxholes or behind sandbags. A heavy company, supplemented with sharpshooters, lined the walls and roof. Out of sight, a few more platoons guarded positions within and beneath the palace, including the all-important control chamber. In the end, Lethbridge-Stewart managed to call up a light battalion's worth of soldiers, several hundred men and women whose loyalty she held beyond question. Compared with what the director brought, it didn't amount to much.

And then there were Sarah Jane's Celts. She watched one, a massive man who appeared to have bear in his ancestry, sling one leg over the wall, apparently willing to brave the multistory drop to the ground below so that he could be the first to strike at their foes. Gwawl rested a hand on the man's tree-trunk bicep.

"Steady, Barra, you'll get your chance soon enough." As the chieftain looked toward Sarah Jane and the Doctor, she saw that, though Gwawl understood the responsibilities of command, he yearned to be mixing it up with the director's soldiers every bit as much as the giant sworn-sword he restrained.

"The director is no amateur," Lethbridge-Stewart pronounced, lowering her oculars. "He's halted his forces just beyond the range of our APC's cannon. Of course, we're out of the range of his as well. I don't know about the ogre though."

"Ogre," Sarah Jane assumed meant "tank." She had a dim memory that "tank" had a rather idiosyncratic etymology in her world. So it made sense that Archology One called them something different.

Behind the ogre came another scattering of soldiers and a few more open-toped utility vehicles. Maximizing her oculars' magnification, Sarah Jane spotted Terrance Goodkyne in one of them. Producing his own pair of powered lenses and surveying enemy lines, the director realized he, too, was under observation. Treating Sarah Jane and company to an unfriendly wave, he reached for his daemon.

Suddenly, the daemon of every person along the walls crackled to life. "This is Director Terrance Goodkyne. I repeat this is Terrance Goodkyne. Everyone within CosDiv Headquarters is in gross violation of Archology One directives. I order you to lay down arms and surrender or face full punitive measures." His voice faded for a moment. "You have fifteen minutes to comply."

"Fifteen minutes? That's not much time," Sarah Jane commented to her companions.

"Honestly, I'm surprised he's giving us that long," the Doctor replied. "Surely he knows that's fifteen minutes further along we'll be in realigning the turbines."

"I would expect," Lethbridge-Stewart concluded, "that fifteen minutes is just as long as the director believes he needs to get his forces optimally positioned."

"All those troops they've got. The APCs. The daedoids." A nearby private looked at the general, worry written across his young features. "Can we do it, ma'am?"

Even Sarah Jane could see they were outnumbered 10-to-1 or more. All eyes turned to Lethbridge-Stewart.

"We have the defender's advantage," she answered. "And we have capacities the director cannot imagine. If each of us plays our part, there is no reason we can't do this." Sarah Jane hoped that was true and not merely stiff upper lip bluster. And, unless she missed a guess honed by experience reading that other Lethbridge-Stewart, so did the general.

"Okay, you heard that," Linus's voice came from Lethbridge-Stewart's daemon. "We've got fifteen minutes before it's on. Can I get all critical personnel down here in the control chamber for a final check and briefing?"

"You go on." The general nodded at Sarah Jane and the Doctor. "I can do the most good up here."

"Very well," the Doctor replied, straightening his jacket. "But let us know the instant anything happens."

It took time for Sarah Jane and the Doctor to thread their way down to a control chamber buzzing with activity. In addition to the scientific and technical teams, soldiers packed it as well. While most of Lethbridge-Stewart's troopers were up top, a few stood guard here as a last line of defense.

And, despite expectations, they'd scrounged up a few reinforcements from elsewhere in Archology One. Scattered among the others in the control chamber were hard-looking men and women wearing dungarees and soft caps: Custodian Herbert's crew from Quadrant East. Not everyone, it seemed, relished Archology One's orderly, technocratic rule. Many of Herbert's "Easties" had jumped at the promise of a fresh start on a new world.

Like Herbert, their caps were among the only hats Sarah Jane had seen here, leaving her to wonder if they were the informal uniform of what passed for Archology One's criminal class. Though she said nothing, Sarah Jane doubted their motely arsenal of knives, clubs, and chains, rounded out by the odd pistol, would amount to much against the auto-rifles carried by Archology One's security forces.

The Doctor joined Linus in checking a pair of thick, transparent cables pulsing with light as they ran out the TARDIS door and into the eleven-dimensional quantum compass. A second set of cables ran from the compass into CosDiv's supercomputers. The energy running through those cables could save worlds, or destroy them. For all that, Sarah Jane couldn't help thinking they looked like fancy jump leads.

Sarah Jane, Two, Systems Operator Thorne, and several of the project's other section leaders crowded in around them, watching. Always wanting to part of anything going on, Arthur wedged himself between Sarah Jane and Two. "The Doctor's compass proved to be absolutely essential," Linus explained to them as he and the Time Lord continued their inspection. "The TARDIS and our computers speak very different languages. The compass acts as a translator allowing them to understand one another."

"How far along are we?" Sarah Jane wanted to know.

"The Doctor was able to get the coordinates for Arthur's world while you were gone," he answered.

"They're programmed in and the TARDIS is guiding our system to direct the cosmic power and create the bridge. The required realignment of the turbines is about 35 percent complete."

"And how long until it's done?"

"I wish I could tell you. There is a lot of unpredictability in quantum calculations. Especially eleven dimensions worth of them. While the TARDIS can guide us, it can't actually realign the turbines for us. All I can tell you is we've got a good, but not great, chance of finishing before…you know…"

"…before Director Goodkyne stops us or something worse happens," Sarah Jane ruefully completed his sentence. "So, the technical aspect is moving along. The Brig, I mean the general, is handling the military aspect. What else do we need to know?"

Two looked across the control chamber to a makeshift studio in one corner. "As soon as we're done here, I'll start broadcasting. I'm going to take our case directly to Archology One's citizens. Even if Terrance Goodkyne isn't, maybe *they'll* be interested in new a world where we don't live in constant fear of the Dimming and don't need to sacrifice a trillion lives just to maintain a precarious existence."

"Once the director figures out what you're up to, he's going to squash your broadcast. I may be the best at what I do," System Operator Thorne confidently proclaimed, "but I can't fight a dozen people who are almost as good as I am. Or can't fight them for long, anyway. Especially since my main priority will be keeping our daemon network going. So say as much as you can as quickly as you can."

Thorne explained how she'd created an insulated daemon network, allowing CosDiv's defenders to continue using their devices without fear of monitoring by Goodkyne's people. "At least for a while," she qualified her statement. "They're going to try to penetrate our network. Hopefully it will take them some time to figure out I'm too good for that. But, after they do, they'll just jam it. And there's nothing I can do about that."

When Two asked, "So, about the elephant in the room?" Sarah Jane couldn't help wondering how long it had been since anyone from Archology One had actually seen an elephant. "Director Goodkyne's request we surrender. Anyone inclined to take him up on that?" After nobody responded, Two pulled out her daemon. "General, you're the trained leader here. When our fifteen minutes are up, do you want to give the director our reply?"

"Bosh," Lethbridge-Stewart's voice thundered through the device. "It's your show. I'm just here to ensure we make it through the third act."

"Linus," Two turned to face him, "you've driven this whole thing from the beginning…"

"That's true," he acknowledged uncomfortably. "But you're our wordsmith."

"Well, Two." The Doctor smiled. "The weight of history falls on you. Victory or defeat, make it count."

The final briefing concluded, Linus returned to his terminal, Thorne went to hers, and Two began setting up to broadcast from her improvised studio. It took Sarah Jane by surprise when the Doctor pulled her aside.

"Sarah, we need to talk." From

him, that phrase never meant anything good. Considering the surprises he sprung upon on her as a matter of course, those five words inevitably heralded a particularly unpleasant revelation.

She put on her brave face. "Doctor, what is it?"

"The most recent measurements Linus and I took on the decay of N-Space. We've passed a point of no return. The space binding the various Londons together has been so badly damaged that it is no longer possible to gradually ease out of the swings. True, opening the bridge means we're probably no longer talking about a probability collapse destroying all Londons or an alternate London fixing itself in your world. But the instant that bridge opens there will be a picosecond of pure mathematical chaos and everything within Archology One that's from another London will be tossed across the multiverse, landing randomly among all the possible Londons. That means you. There's no telling where you'll end up."

Sarah Jane lowered her eyes and bit her lip.

"There is another option," the Doctor whispered. "The TARDIS is tied-up in computations to create the bridge from here to Arthur's world. But I'm willing to risk rerouting enough power beforehand to send you, and Arthur, someplace safe."

Despite spending a few moments reflecting on his offer, Sarah Jane's answer was never in doubt. "No, Doctor, I'll stay. Two, Linus, the general, and everyone else here, they're risking their lives for us. I owe it to them to stay. More than that, remember I'm fighting for my London, too."

"That's brave, Sarah. But one person is hardly likely to make a difference."

"You're kind, Doctor. Very kind," Sarah Jane acknowledged. "But you're also lying. The entire history of our travels proves one person can make a difference."

Her friend's expression said he was enormously proud of her answer but wished she'd chosen differently. "I'll try to find you, of course I will, but," the Doctor avoided her eyes, "I can give you no guarantees. You need to know the score."

"I understand, but the choice is mine to make." Her eyes flickered upward. "And, Doctor, you've forgotten something."

"The garment which causes swings to treat me like a native? I've removed that."

"No, Doctor, you've forgotten something else."

"Oh, Sarah, I very much doubt that," he sounded taken aback. "I've forgotten very few things in the whole course of my existence."

"Okay, overlooked something, then," Sarah Jane adjusted her choice of words.

"What would that be?"

"I'm not the only one here from a different London. Gwawl and his soldiers. They signed on knowing they could die. But not that they would be scattered across the universe. They need to have a choice as well."

"You're right, of course," the Doctor acknowledged. "Let's go see your friend. I think it's best you do the talking."

"Very well, but first I need to borrow paper and pen." Securing the required items from a junior technician,

she scrawled something on the paper. Folding it up and sticking it in her pocket, she smiled enigmatically at the Doctor.

Gwawl's warriors stood at attention in the grassy courtyard, shoulder to shoulder in a long line. Sarah Jane had explained to Gwawl, as best she could, the risks now facing her fellow alternate Londoners in Archology One. She was curious what he had made of it and how he would relate the information to his followers. Sarah Jane knew only that he had extracted two promises from her and the Doctor.

The chieftain strode up and down the line, inspecting his warriors. Satisfied, he addressed the assemblage of fierce-looking men and women. "The Unseelie plan to unmake all the worlds of men. Beneath this castle, the Seelie perform a great ritual to thwart them. But as your eyes have seen, even as we speak, the Unseelie mass for attack. The Seelie need more time to work their magic. From among all the worlds, they have summoned the men and women of Gwawl, son of Gwastad, to Tír na nÓg because they knew no one else would do. Our fierce hearts, true aim, and keen blades will buy the time they need to finish their magic.

"Know that the Unseelie have terrible weapons and magic at their disposal. Know also that when the Seelie complete their ritual those of us who still draw breath will be cast adrift among the worlds.

"When each of you pledged fealty to me, I vowed never to lead you into an unwinnable fight. Though this fight is not unwinnable, for the risks we face, it might as well be. I release you from your oaths. Today, I call not for fealty but for volunteers. If you wish, the Seelie will take you home right now. None shall name you coward for returning to the world of your mothers and fathers, working your farms, and raising a family.

"But know also that the Seelie swear, when the fight is won, their ritual complete, and the worlds of men saved, they shall return to our world with the story. And all there shall know the names and deeds of those who fought not only for our world but for all worlds. A battle that will be told of in a thousand years of stories and songs."

Taking his longsword, Gwawl drove its tip into the earth and drew a line in front of his warriors. The dark earth turned by his blade stood out vividly against the green grass. "To return, you need only stand in place. Again, none shall think less of you for choosing to go home, live long, and live well. But I ask, who among you will step across this line and join me in the greatest of all battles? Who will step across the line…and into legend?"

Sarah Jane gasped as 160 warriors moved as one. Not a single pair of feet remained behind Gwawl's line.

"It has been fourteen minutes," the Doctor observed prosaically after the moment's impact faded. "I can't imagine the director will be long in beginning his assault once he has Two's reply." Climbing the stairs, he and Sarah Jane joined Alicia Lethbridge-Stewart atop the palace walls. As if on cue, every daemon began broadcasting. "This is Director Goodkyne. It has been fifteen minutes. Again, I repeat, you are in gross violation of Archolo-

gy One directives. Lay down your arms and surrender or face full punitive measures. How do you answer?"

Awful silence hung in the air for a short eternity.

"Choke on it!" Two's voice snapped from the daemons as Sarah Jane imagined she heard Terrance Goodkyne's gasp all the way from his utility vehicle.

"Choke on it?" Lethbridge-Stewart repeated, perplexed. "Hardly eloquent. But I suppose it gets the job done. All personnel, switch to the insulated network."

"What are you smirking about, Sarah?" the Doctor asked his companion.

From her pocket, Sarah Jane produced the scrap of paper and handed it to him. Unfolding the page, he read his companion's blocky script.

CHOKE ON IT

The Doctor rolled his eyes.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Beyond the palace, orders in a dozen voices rung out across Directorate lines; antiseptic prescriptions for systematic slaughter. Infantry broke from their positions as armored personnel carriers pushed slowly forward, their guns swiveling toward targets. As obvious as it would have been to Sarah Jane, she realized there had been no pre-assault bombardment to soften up the defenders.

"Fifty-one percent down here," Linus reported through Lethbridge-Stewart's daemon. "If this was normal physics, I'd tell you we're halfway done. But it's quantum, so, well, just hold Goodkyne's people as long as you can."

Beside Sarah Jane, the Doctor fumbled with his coat. "Shouldn't we be getting to the control chamber?"

"In a moment, Sarah. But first, there's something that needs doing." Producing the sonic screwdriver, the tiny device began humming as he held it over the wall. At the same instant, Directorate vehicles fell silent as their engines cut off. Daedaloids plummeted from the sky. Dazed men and women climbed forth from three of them. From the fourth, exploding upon impact, only fire and black smoke escaped. On the ground, armored personnel carriers rolled to a stop, turrets halted mid-turn.

"Those machines are remarkably advanced," the Doctor commented to Sarah Jane. "Too much for their own good, actually. With better technology, controlling their electronics and simply turning them off is a snap." Looking at the ogre, his triumphant expression grew petulant. "Unfortunately, the sonic screwdriver will do nothing against that obsolete beast. It's all mechanical. No electronics at all, you see.

"Now I should go lend Linus a hand," he said, tucking the screwdriver in his pocket. "I leave taking care of that tank in the capable hands of you and the general."

"Me?" his statement caught her by surprise. "Aren't I coming with you?"

"I appreciate that, I really do," he acknowledged. "But I have the help I require down there. Where I really need you is here." With that, he took the helmet Lethbridge-Stewart had given Sarah Jane and placed it on her head. "Be another set of eyes and ears for the general. And another brain."

"Doctor, I'm not a solider," she protested.

"And you won't need to be," he replied. "I doubt Archology One has fought a real war in decades, if not generations. While that is commendable, it also means their knowledge of tactics is purely theoretical. If you've seen a war film or documentary, to say nothing of some of the experiences you've had in our travels, I expect your knowledge is as good as the general's." The Doctor looked up at Lethbridge-Stewart striding confidently along the walls as she barked out orders to her NCOs. "Not that I'd tell her that."

Sarah Jane thought about the way Goodkyne's forces had advanced on Hampton Court Palace in neat, vulnerable rows and columns as well as the lack of any pre-assault bombardment. That seemed to confirm the Doctor's assessment. Feiging a confidence she did not truly feel, Sarah Jane nodded.

"Also," the Doctor added, glancing at Gwawl and his company, "they will need someone to translate. Anyway, I doubt rank or chain of command count for much with them. It's all about personality. I suspect you're the only one of us your friend will really listen to."

Watching her dearest friend descend the stairs, Sarah Jane hoped it would not be the last time she would see him. Taking a deep breath and willing herself to be brave Sarah Jane turned to face the fray.

As the ogre lumbered into range, the defenders' APC opened fire. The battlefield resounded with the clang of a round bouncing off the orge's thickly-armored sides. "General, can that thing really destroy the tank…the ogre, I mean?" Sarah Jane asked.

"Destroy? Perhaps not," Lethbridge-Stewart answered honestly. "But a direct hit could knock off a tread or spoil its gun. And that's nearly as good."

The ogre's cannon lowered, roaring as it loosed a shot. Debris rose into the air as the shell landed left of the defenders' vehicle. As the ogre's turret turned, another round from the APC glanced off its armor. The ogre's next shot stuck wide and right of the vehicle. If its gunner was halfway decent and corrected between the two missed shots…

"General, why don't you have our APC move after every few rounds," Sarah Jane suggested. "Don't give the ogre a fixed target."

Lethbridge-Stewart looked at Sarah Jane with respect. "An excellent idea, Smith." Using her daemon, the general called in the order.

The two vehicles continued dueling, the APC changing position every couple shots. In the best case scenario, the ogre would use up its ammunition trying to hit the armored personnel carrier. Sarah Jane's hopes rose as the vehicle's third hit sent bits of metal flying off the ogre. But whatever damage had been done wasn't enough to stop the ogre advancing or firing. On its fifth shot, the ogre got lucky. Only scattered wreckage and a red-orange fireball roaring into the sky marked where the APC had been.

A hush fell over both sides and fighting paused as if that single event suddenly reminded Archology One what war really was. As suddenly as it began, the truce ended. When Directorate forces closed within range of Archology One's small arms, gunfire erupted from each side of the palace walls. Crisp, clean staccato bursts from auto-guns were punctuated by deep

bangs from the Celt's bolt action rifles.

"Well, now it's on," Lethbridge-Stewart's voice was barely audible over the din.

Though badly outnumbered, the palace walls and defensive positions allowed CosDiv's protectors to slow the Directorate's advance to a crawl. And defensive fire would only grow more murderous as attackers neared the main gate…precisely as Hampton Court's Tudor builders had intended four centuries earlier.

The ogre's sudden silence was nearly as alarming as its firing had been. Through her oculars, Sarah Jane watched its massive gun elevate while the turret turned to target the palace walls. When the weapon boomed to life again, its shot fell just short, tossing large chucks of pavement high into the air as the round detonated. With a sinking sensation in her stomach, Sarah Jane understood the ogre's real purpose. Taking out the defenders' solitary APC had been a side benefit. The ogre was here to bring the walls down so that Goodkyne's people wouldn't have to fight their way through the main gate.

"General, we've got to take that thing out!" Sarah Jane yelled.

"Scientist Venkatagiri," Lethbridge-Stewart called into her daemon. "What is the status of the realignment?"

Sarah Jane thought she caught an edge of anxiety in the general's voice.

"Eighty-two percent." Linus's voice sounded staticy as he replied.

The general turned to Sarah Jane, "You're right about the ogre. But we've got to reach it first." Lethbridge-Stewart looked thoughtful. "Your chaps might be just the thing! A bit of shock action to punch though enemy lines. Get them down to the gate."

Sarah Jane searched through the defenders until locating Gwawl, son of Gwastad. His rifle braced against the wall, the chieftain knelt, minimizing how much he exposed to his enemies. Leaning forward, she shouted into his ear, "Gwawl, we need you and your followers to sortie out there and take out that tank…er, ogre…er, moving cannon."

Favoring Sarah Jane with a kid-at-Christmas grin, Gwawl began yelling up and down defensive lines. His booming voice somehow managed to be audible above thousands of guns as he mustered his sworn-rifles and commanded them to mass at the gate.

The ogre's next shot went high, clearing the walls and detonating in the courtyard…fortunately well clear of Lethbridge-Stewart's daedaloid. The last of the Celts were descending the stairs when the ogre finally struck home. Instinctively, Sarah Jane reached out, clutching a battlement to steady herself. She watched a ten meter-wide section of wall collapse and tumble away. As the smoke and dust cleared, she saw a tiny bit, perhaps two meters high, remained below the breach. Rubble piled on each side of the downsized wall. Though somewhat defensible, it made a poor substitute for what had been there before.

Sarah Jane's gut said that, by concentrating fire, they could probably keep Directorate forces from making much of one such opening. But holding the palace against two breaches would be nearly impossible. And three completely so. The ogre had to be dealt with, and soon.

"The irregulars are assembled," the officer at the gate reported through the general's daemon.

"Very well. Unleash the Celts," Lethbridge-Stewart ordered with a calm Sarah Jane envied.

With Gwawl at the fore, they poured forth from the palace. If the Celts' high-pitched, dissonant battle cries unnerved Sarah Jane, she wondered what impact they had on the director's forces. For the first time she noted that many of Gwawl's warriors fought nearly naked…and some completely so; excepting only the blue woad coating their bodies. Firing as they ran, the warriors knelt briefly after each shot to work the bolt on their weapons before continuing their mad dash.

Sarah Jane held her breath. They remained exposed to enemy guns until they reached Directorate lines. From the walls, the general's forces laid down suppressive fire making it difficult and risky for their opponents to pick off Gwawl's sworn-swords. Still, to Sarah Jane's eyes, the charging Celts withered like wheat before a thresher.

Perhaps half of them reached Directorate lines. It pleased her to see, despite personally leading the charge, Gwawl numbered among them. At close quarters, the fight's dynamic changed. Neither side seemed willing to risk hitting their own people by firing into the chaotic brawl. At a distance, the Celt's bolt action rifles couldn't compete with auto-guns. In furious melee, however, bayonets and stunners proved no match for longswords in the hands of those who knew how to use them.

Glorious as it was to watch, the Celts' charge hadn't actually improved the situation much. They weren't significantly nearer the ogre, still shelling palace walls, than when they began. Terrance Goodkyne had enough soldiers to keep throwing warm bodies against Gwawl's warriors while the Directorate flanks continued their steady advance toward CosDiv headquarters.

The ground shook beneath Sarah Jane's feet as the ogre scored another hit, blowing away another stretch of wall. A determined soldier could scramble over the heap of debris remaining beneath. "General, we've got to get that ogre!"

"If you have suggestions, Journalist Smith, I am open to them."

The idea came suddenly. "Your daedaloid!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Forcing their way off the walls and into the general's flyer, Sarah Jane found Wellington there, a safety harness securing the spaniel into the cockpit.

"Where I go, he goes," Lethbridge-Stewart responded to Sarah Jane's surprised expression. Jumping behind the controls, she patted her pet's head as she brought the daedaloid to life. Briefly, Sarah Jane hoped Arthur would be safe underneath the palace.

Rising above the courtyard, the general cleared the walls so narrowly that Sarah Jane feared she'd take the heads off her own soldiers. Skimming across the battlefield at nearly ground level, dodging and weaving so as to not allow the Directorate's heavy weapons a clear shot at the daedaloid, Lethbridge-Stewart then hovered the vehicle behind Celt lines. Sarah Jane

hopped down and sought out Gwawl amidst the fray.

Distracted, she was almost blindsided by a stunner-wielding soldier. Under other circumstances, Sarah Jane might have panicked. Focused on her all-important task of finding the chieftain, she reacted with a mechanical calm. Raising a knee into his stomach, she then swept his legs. Even before the soldier hit the ground, a wild-eyed, sword-wielding Celt already stood over him.

Sarah Jane was unsurprised to find the chieftain at the melee's heart. "'Gwawl!" she shouted "Grab your seven best and come with me."

"M'lady, I will not turn my back on my sworn-swords in battle's heat."

"We have to get rid of the moving cannon." Sarah Jane suspected she knew the words which would speak to Gwawl's heart. "I'm not taking you from the heat of battle…I'm taking you to it!"

The chieftain's smile confirmed her suspicions. Moving through his ranks, he tapped seven fighters on the back, motioning for the sweaty, blooded men and women to follow him.

Leaping into the daedaloid, Sarah Jane helped the Celts up and showed them how to belt themselves in. Some, like Gwawl, wore expressions suggesting this was all some grand adventure. Others appeared grim, as if certain the strange contraption would kill them long before the Unseelie had a chance.

The general zigged and zagged on a circuitous route avoiding most of the battlefield. True, the Doctor had neutralized the Directorate's daedaloids and armored personnel carriers. But there were still those rocket launchers to worry about. Circling back over the attackers' rear lines, the general put her flyer down behind the ogre.

"Behind the turret, that's the thing encasing the cannon, there is a crew hatch. Get that open and what's inside bleeds and dies the same as anything else," the general explained with ghoulish dispassion. Sarah Jane translated. Seeing Gwawl nod, she opened the sliding door.

As Sarah Jane reached for her buckle, Lethbridge-Stewart raised an eyebrow. "No margin for misunderstanding," she told the general matter-of-factly. "Wait for me if…you can."

Bolting from the daedeloid, Sarah Jane ran with the Celts. Enemy fire felled one of them as they sprinted to the ogre and splayed the ursine-like Barra across its chassis as soon as they climbed on top. "That's the crew hatch," Sarah Jane pointed while shouting at Gwawl over the din of gunfire and the ogre's whining engine.

"We will make you proud, M'lady," Gwawl saluted. "But remember your promises."

"They will be remembered. And kept," Sarah Jane answered. Rushing away, she forced herself to master her rising dread at gunshots striking the pavement all around her. Spotting a squad of Directorate infantry advancing on the daedaloid, she broke into a sprint before taking a flying leap into the slowly ascending craft. Catching the doorframe with her arms, she hauled herself aboard and scrambled into her seat.

Pulling up and away, Lethbridge-Stewart shut the door. Buckled in, Sarah Jane glanced out the window. Below, using his sword as a crowbar, the chieftain and his soldiers pried open the hatch. The last Sarah Jane ever saw

of Gwawl, son of Gwastad, was the chieftain lowering himself inside the vehicle, sword in one hand and a dagger clenched between his teeth.

But, whatever happened inside that ogre, the next shot it got off was its last.

The general began a wide circle away from Directorate rear lines, hoping to again bypass the battlefield as they returned to CosDiv headquarters. Sarah Jane saw the woman beneath them, shouldering her rocket launcher as she aimed at the daedaloid. And she saw Sarah Jane. For an instant, their eyes locked. In a film, Sarah Jane thought, there would have been some recognition of common humanity to prevent the woman from firing.

This was no film. One of the launcher's four tubes belched smoke as the weapon fired.

"Incoming!" Sarah Jane screamed.

Instantly, the general began evasive maneuvers.

"Instantly" proved not quickly enough.

Anchored only by her safety belt, Sarah Jane bounced around the daedaloid's cabin as the rocket struck. Alarms chorused from the craft's controls, joined by Wellington's anxious barking. The vehicle dipped, sagging to one side. The rocket had destroyed its right aft turbofan.

"Annoying, but we'll live." Sarah Jane almost finished the thought before she heard the other turbofans slowing as the cockpit's chorus of alarms swell into a choir.

"We're losing the power system," Lethbridge-Stewart yelled. "I'll try to get us home." Eyeballing their altitude and angle of descent, Sarah Jane's heart sank. They hurtled toward a collision with the same palace walls they had sought to preserve.

The general mumbled something. Sarah Jane thought it might have been "silver lining." Fighting her damaged craft's controls, Lethbridge-Stewart nudged it to the left, trying to hold the vehicle steady while aiming for one of the gaps which the now defunct ogre had blasted through Hampton Court's walls.

And they almost cleared the gap. The daedaloid struck the rubble beneath the hole with a loud crunch. The violent impact momentarily pitched the craft's nose upward while tossing it on one side. After a brief ascent, gravity reasserted itself. Even as the general frantically tried to right the daedaloid, it struck the ground and slid along the courtyard on its side for 50 meters before coming to rest.

"Journalist Smith, are you all right?"

Sarah Jane suspected her entire body would be a single bruise tomorrow. If she lived that long. Something warm and wet trickled down her face to her lips, where she tasted blood. Sarah Jane was grateful she'd accepted Lethbridge-Stewart's offer of a helmet. Nothing felt broken and everything seemed to move.

"Good enough?" she volunteered.

Freeing herself from the cockpit's safety web, Lethbridge-Stewart tucked the shaken but uninjured Wellington under one arm before pulling herself from the daedaloid. Once outside, she offered Sarah Jane a hand in exiting.

Before doing anything else, the general checked in with Linus regarding the cosmic turbines.

"Eighty-nine percent," he informed them.

"Okay, the ogre is dead," Sarah Jane said as they returned to the walls. "What happens now?"

"I've got to look after the big picture," the general said. "But that hole," Lethbridge-Stewart looked at the gap in the wall they had just flown through, "is our biggest vulnerability. Smith, I don't know what kind of world you come from. But you have a solid head for this business. You're responsible for defending that gap."

Before the surprised Sarah Jane thought of an appropriate response, Lethbridge-Stewart shouted to the defenders within earshot. "Your orders are to keep Director Goodkyne's forces from getting through that hole. Brevet Captain Smith here is in charge."

The conscripted Sarah Jane took a moment to survey the battlefield through her oculars. From graceful take-off to what could charitably be called a landing had taken, at most, five minutes. And yet that short span of time had not been kind to CosDiv's defenders. While a small force, thick with flamers and rocket launchers, advanced on the main gate, the Directorate's major thrust converged around the two gaps the ogre had made. Most of the defenders' positions outside the palace had fallen and Lethbridge-Stewart's troops fought a desperate delaying action there. It all confirmed Sarah Jane's suspicion that two breaches were likely too much for their thin defense to hold.

Newly minted officer though she was, Sarah Jane didn't see much she could do to stem the tide. Keeping the oculars handy, she focused on calling out advances by Directorate forces to "her troops," though she was fairly certain they'd seen them anyway.

"Begging your pardon, Ma'am," from behind, a voice sought Sarah Jane's attention. It surprised her to find Custodian Herbert and two of his fellow Easties outside of the control chamber and wandering around the defenders' positions up top.

"We've been following what's happening up here on our daemons," Herbert explained. "This is Yegg Jones and this is Wireman Clarke. They'll patch that hole for you," he announced, eyeing the fallen walls.

From her days as a cub reporter working the crime beat, Sarah Jane knew the terms "Yegg" and "Wireman." The former was a safecracker or burglar who used explosives to access valuables. The latter, also known as a "second-story man," was a cat burglar. It fascinated her that even members of the underworld used the "occupation followed by last name" nomenclature of broader Archology One society.

Herbert's claim, however, seemed unlikely. A full construction crew would need days if not weeks to repair that kind of damage. Still, Sarah Jane acknowledged her side was not exactly swimming in options at the moment. "What do you have in mind?"

With a sly smile, Yegg Jones held up several homemade satchel charges.

"While I appreciate your enthusiasm, I think that wall already has enough holes in it."

"It's not what blows that matters, Ma'am," Jones answered her softly, "It's how it falls."

Her idea made a perverse kind of sense to Sarah Jane. After all, the whole profession of commercial demolition rested on the ability to control explosions and their aftermath. In

the worst case scenario, blowing bigger holes in the palace wall would only speed a conclusion that increasingly appeared forgone. Therefore, if there was any chance the Easties' plan might work, it seemed worth trying.

"Very well. Do it," Sarah Jane replied, surprised by the sound of authority in her voice. "As fast as you can, do it!"

One satchel charge slung across his back, Wireman Clarke scaled the wall with the ease of a spider on its web. As he moved up and down alongside the gap made by the ogre, Yegg Jones directed him to the best place for setting the charge. When Clarke had positioned the explosive to Jones's satisfaction, the wireman jumped from the wall and the pair repeated the process on the other side of the hole.

The curious activity pulled Lethbridge-Stewart away from her command post. "What's all this, Brevet Captain Smith?" she asked Sarah Jane, who summarized the Easties' plan for her.

"Jones, how certain are you this is going to work?" Lethbridge-Stewart asked, more skeptical than Sarah Jane had been.

Sarah Jane recognized the look on Jones's face. The expression of a master whose competence at her craft has been questioned. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm betting my life on it…ma'am," the yegg replied.

"That's all I can ask," the general acknowledged. "I suppose you're an old hand at this. Well, make this one count."

"Wine and candy," Jones responded with an impertinent wink. Clearly some sort of rhyming slang, while Sarah Jane couldn't work out its exact meaning, the yegg's general sentiment came through clearly enough.

Lethbridge-Stewart surveyed the situation outside Hampton Court Palace. Battle had come so close that the task no longer required oculars. As the siege neared its apparent endgame, even fewer of her defenders remained beyond the walls than minutes earlier. Lethbridge-Stewart ordered their withdrawal.

While soldiers on the walls and manning the rubble piles laid down suppressive fire, the defenders outside abandoned their positions. In ones, twos, and threes, with hale troopers assisting the wounded, they scrambled over the debris even as opposing forces stepped up their advance behind them. It pleased Sarah Jane to see that, in addition to Lethbridge-Stewart's orderly and presentable soldiers, more than a few of the wild Celts remained among the living.

Overlooked, and with no one to help him, a soldier with a serious leg wound brought up the rear with Directorate troopers less than 30 meters behind. There was no way the injured man would make it to safety on his own.

"Nobody gets left behind today," Lethbridge-Stewart announced. Charging out of the palace, the general slung him over her shoulders before staggering back across the barrier. Despite her soldiers' cover fire, Directorate rounds ricocheted all around the general. The moment her commander placed one foot on solid ground within the walls, Sarah Jane turned to Yegg Jones.

"Now!"

So deafening were the tandem explosions that the sound made by tons of rubble collapsing on itself was bare-

ly audible. Tense instants followed while smoke and dust obscured the yegg's handiwork. As it began clearing, Sarah Jane sighed with relief…and a chorus of cheers rose within the walls. True, the two blown sections of wall were a little lower. But, just as Jones insisted it would, most of the debris had tumbled into the gap and created a more formidable barrier. Sarah Jane supposed it was, technically, scalable but wouldn't have wanted to try it under concentrated fire.

Brevet Captain Sarah Jane Smith dispatched the Easties to the remaining breach in the wall. Even if they failed, she suspected it could be held. And the main gate, just as the Tudors had hoped, remained a choke point where superior numbers didn't count for much. Even with rockets and flamers.

"I wonder what Goodkyne thinks of that!" Sarah Jane exclaimed. Unable to resist gloating, she climbed the wall and used her oculars. Ramping up their magnification, she saw the director's vehicle. But without the director in it. A careful scan of the battlefield yielded no trace of Terrance Goodkyne.

"Where's that swine gone off to?" beside her, Lethbridge-Stewart had also noticed their adversary's absence.

Sarah Jane pondered the question. Remembering her visit to the energy harvesting sphere, she found an answer she didn't like. As leader of the whole cosmic energy project, Goodkyne knew CosDiv's infrastructure as well as Linus and the other staff. Better, probably.

"The utility conduits!" she said anxiously.

"What?"

Realizing the general had only a casual knowledge of CosDiv facilities, Sarah Jane explained. "There are conduits running from headquarters out to the spheres. There may be other ways to access the conduits as well. I can't see Director Goodkyne anywhere out there, so…"

"Good heavens!" Lethbridge-Stewart exclaimed, realizing what Sarah Jane was driving at. "We've got to get to the control chamber!" Rallying the nearest soldiers to accompany her, she led them, and Sarah Jane, on frantic charge inside the palace.

"Scientist Venkatagiri? Information Specialist Smith? Thorne? Anyone?" the general shouted on her daemon, trying to raise those who'd remained in the belowground nerve center. Sarah Jane hoped that the absence of any response meant the Directorate's information technology specialists were jamming the defenders' network. The alternative was unthinkable.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As they burst into the control chamber, surprised looks on the scientific and technical teams' faces told Sarah Jane they weren't too late. As to whether their presence would do any good…that was a separate question.

"What's going on?" Two asked. "Has the Directorate breached our defenses?"

"Not the way you mean," Sarah Jane answered. "But I think Goodkyne is using the utility conduits to bypass our perimeter."

Linus cursed himself for not considering the possibility and fear began palpably rippling through the room.

"Everyone calm down," Lethbridge-Stewart's voice echoed through the large space. "Remember, the direc-

tor is the one who has been forced to Plan B. The initiative remains ours." Having nipped impending panic in the bud, the general sought out Linus. "Scientist Venkatagiri, do the conduits lead directly into the control chamber?"

"No. Not on the blueprints, anyway. Who knows what the director might have done off the books, though."

"But, so far as you know, the only entry points are the two doors?"

Linus nodded.

"That will have to do. How far are you on the realignment?"

"Ninety-one percent," Linus replied, checking his terminal.

The general again raised her voice. "Everyone unessential to realigning the turbines and creating the quantum bridge, step forward."

After dividing the available bodies into three teams, Lethbridge-Stewart assigned one to cover each door. The third team she kept in reserve to reinforce whichever door faced attack first. Or in the event their worst fears proved true and Director Goodkyne had a secret entry point for the chamber.

The general's mouth curled into a frown, as if encountering an unpleasant smell. "Venkatagiri, what happens if your equipment is damaged?"

"I don't know, exactly," Linus acknowledged. "Probably nothing good. Giving the nature and magnitude of the power it's controlling, quite possibly something really, really bad."

"Then Goodkyne will know that as well." Again, the general addressed her defenders. "If Directorate forces get inside, and I say *if*, keep things hand-to-hand. No guns. No explosives," she directed that last comment at the Easties. "Everyone keep your stunners, or whatever you've got, handy." Noticing Sarah Jane unarmed except for her sharp piece of ceramic, Lethbridge-Stewart handed her a stun truncheon.

Time passed. Sarah Jane watched and waited.

When gunfire began echoing from the hallways, the general's troops took up positions around the doorframe closest to the sound. Soon after, a group of defenders turned the corner sprinting for the control chamber's safety. Several had burns and charred uniforms. Gouts of white-yellow flame chased after them. The Directorate was using flamers to clear defenders from its path.

Oddly, the thought cheered Sarah Jane. It argued against Director Goodkyne having a secret entrance to the control chamber itself.

A trio of Goodkyne's soldiers broke around the corner, the man in the middle carrying one of the long, unwieldy flamers. When the weapon's range proved inadequate for reaching the chamber door, the defenders quickly picked them off.

Soldiers traded gunfire from both ends of the hallway. With defenders sheltered by the doorframe and attackers taking cover behind the corner, injuries were few. But it transformed the corridor into a shooting gallery where friendly fire would be as lethal as enemy action. Fortunately, the Directorate had to cross that corridor. The defenders had only to prevent them from doing so. Feeling better about things than she had in a while, Sarah Jane looked back at Linus.

"Progress?"

"Ninety-four percent!"

Minutes brought no let up in the frenzied exchange of bullets. Then, as Directorate guns went silent, three dark objects the size and shape of potatoes lobbed around the corner, rolling down the hallway toward the defenders. Grenades, Sarah Jane realized, throwing herself to the ground even before someone shouted "Hit the deck!"

Instead of explosions, three soft bangs so close together they almost merged into one were followed by demonic warbling and flashing lights bright enough to blind. The defenders at the doorway fell to the floor, as incapacitated as the assassins Arthur had shocked at Directorate HQ.

"Stun grenades," the general warned her soldiers. "And I doubt they only brought three. Get that door closed and hope it holds." Moments after the defenders shut, locked, and barred the door, furious pounding and banging began from the other side.

With it clear which door the Directorate had focused on, Lethbridge-Stewart pulled half her reserve to reinforce its guards. The stun grenades gave Sarah Jane an idea, "General, may I have a moment?" she asked before pitching her suggestion to the appreciative commander.

Everything went quiet on the door's opposite side. Presumably, the director's forces realized the portal wouldn't yield so easily. Then the clang of metal on metal rung from the door. The attackers had either brought or improvised some kind of ram. Despite herself, Sarah Jane smiled, thinking that might be the only aspect of this crazy siege that would have made sense to Hampton Court's original inhabitants.

The sustained battering proved hard on the ears. With each hit, the door jumped in its frame. But the rough treatment never seemed to weaken or loosen it. Eventually, the ramming stopped, too. Sarah Jane wondered what would come next…like everyone else in the room; except perhaps Linus and the Doctor, too busy with the realignment to notice. Concerned the director might try his luck with the other door, the general pulled back the reserves she'd committed to the first.

"The Lady or the Tiger?" Alicia Lethbridge-Stewart whispered to herself, eyeing both portals.

"Actually, our choices aren't that good." Sarah Jane responded amazed that, for all the differences between their worlds, that story apparently existed in Archology One as well.

"How long?" Sarah Jane shouted back to Linus.

"Ninety-Seven percent!" The waiting continued, eating away at Sarah Jane's nerves. When the explosion came, it was tiny, almost like a Christmas cracker, compared with the titanic roars she'd experienced on the walls half an hour before. Still, she practically jumped out of her skin. Rather than blasting away, the door hung limply on its hinges. It tumbled forward and clattered to the floor, pushed by an eager scrum of Directorate soldiers.

Bunching up like that was a mistake. Two could play at the incapacitation game. "Now, Arthur!" Sarah Jane shouted.

Concealed beside the doorframe, Arthur loosed a jolt of electricity with a sharp crack. The half-dozen troopers leading the Directorate's charge tum-

bled like pins. When one of them still showed a bit of activity, Arthur dragged her away with his forelegs, just as he had done with the giant eels of his home.

But Directorate forces just kept coming. At least three or four dozen, a heavy platoon's worth. Sarah Jane realized she had seen the same hard, confident expressions in the faces of personnel from UNIT, SAS, and the Royal Marines. No run-of-the-mill security officers, these men and women were whatever passed for special forces in Archology One. Terrance Goodkyne brought up the rear, triumph already etched onto his features.

"Team Two, hold your position. All others engage," Lethbridge-Stewart ordered.

As the forces rushed together, from somewhere in Directorate ranks, a grenade flew toward the computers controlling the cosmic energy. Sarah Jane prayed it was another stunner. Leaping high off the ground, seeming to float for an instant, one of the defenders batted it to the ground. As both grenade and soldier landed, he scrambled on top of the weapon, its warble audible even through his flesh. As soon as the wailing ceased, two Easties rushed forward to drag the stunned and wounded man to safety.

"Don't do that again!" Lethbridge-Stewart and Director Goodkyne shouted at once, the adversaries momentarily united by concern that even a stun grenade could be too much for the delicate equipment now controlling the energies of N-space. Forewarned by their respective commanders, each side resumed its charge, lines clashing together in a furious blur of stun truncheons, bayonets, and bare-knuckles brawling.

The director may have had Archology One's special forces at his disposal, but those summoned by Lethbridge-Stewart to defend CosDiv's headquarters were no green recruits. A mixture of seasoned career soldiers and talented, determined youngsters, they gave as good as they got. With each side highly trained and identically equipped, it was a contest of attrition. Unfortunately, the director had more bodies to throw at the problem.

The stunner Lethbridge-Stewart had given Sarah Jane felt unfamiliar in her hands. Instead, she opted for the sharpened ceramic she'd carried since the world of the Anglo-French War. A world that, in comparison to the scene unfolding around her, felt about as strange and alien as Dover.

Brandishing her weapon at the nearest Directorate trooper, he eyed it nervously. True, it was primitive compared with his stun baton. Wondering if that was the point, Sarah Jane smirked at her accidental pun. Stunners were innovations but human beings had been hardwired to fear pointy things for a very long time.

With rather more luck than skill, Sarah Jane admitted to herself, she slashed her opponent across his forearm. The sharp edge left a deep valley of crimson in its wake. Crying out, he dropped the stunner. With breathtaking speed, a group of Easties fell upon him as Sarah Jane sought out another target. She desperately wanted to know how the realignment was progressing but, since that information might benefit Director Goodkyne as well, Scientist Venkatagiri held his tongue.

Deciding he was needed elsewhere, the Doctor left Linus's side to join the

fray. Combatants on both sides were shocked when the white-haired man lifted a Directorate trooper off the ground and, holding him over his head, tossed the beefy soldier back five meters before moving on to the next adversary.

Quadrant East's contingent mostly hung back, hiding behind cover or biding their time in the shadows. But, as they had during Sarah Jane's fight, whenever a Directorate trooper got distracted or too fully engaged with one of the general's soldiers, the Easties darted from safety to beat the attacker senseless with pipes, wrenches, and bricks before returning to cover.

Going straight for the source of their troubles, Two dodged and ducked Directorate soldiers in reckless charge at Terrance Goodkyne. Perhaps the spectacle of the petite figure in civilian attire making such an assault proved so surreal that his guards couldn't react. Sarah Jane's doppelganger reached him with surprising ease.

At first, the director's greater reach gave him an advantage. Wrapping his sculptor's hands around Two's throat, he throttled her while she struggled to close. But, whether because she had watched her double do it earlier or because the maneuver was inherent to all Sarah Jane Smiths, Two broke Goodkyne's grasp by stomping on his foot. His concentration shaken, Two took the offensive. Grabbing the director by his platinum hair, she repeatedly slammed his head against the nearest desk.

Everywhere Sarah Jane looked, her side's courage and skill were on display. But attrition took its toll. As the defenders thinned, the Easties broke from cover to join the scrap. Unfortunately, in open combat they were no match for the elite of Archology One security. Slowly but surely, the control chamber's dwindling protectors were driven back, nearer and nearer to Linus and the terminal controlling the cosmic turbines.

The Doctor rarely lost his calm but, when he did, the spectacle was terrifying, almost bestial. Standing in front of Linus's desk, the Doctor waved a limp security trooper, wielding him like a giant cudgel against his fellows.

Opting for defense instead of attack, in desperation Sarah Jane wrapped her arms and legs around two of Goodkyne's troopers. Rather than trying to take them out, she hoped only to prevent them from advancing further. As it was, it seemed as if they could reach out and touch Linus's machine.

With a sharp bang, the control chamber's other door tumbled inward and dozens more Directorate troops stormed in. Sarah Jane's heart sank.

From behind her, Linus called out "One-hundred per…"

The world stretched out in slow motion and ground to a halt, looking like a still image from Two's daemon. Instead of black, the whole world went gray and then white.

So, this is what 'winning' feelings like? Sarah Jane thought drolly as every atom in her body was individually yanked out of space and time.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"And I was really a woman?" The Brigadier asked, fixated on that part of the tale.

One of the things which most enchanted the Doctor about humans was their endless capacity to surprise. Even

such a seemingly intractable creature as Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart. Despite the Doctor's expectations, the Brigadier seemed less alarmed than fascinated by the notion.

Along with Captain Yates, Lieutenant Sullivan, and Sergeant Benton, the Doctor and Brigadier sat in the parlor of UNIT's London office, a posh townhome with a St. James's address. Unlike Base 5, its decor was to Lethbridge-Stewart's personal specifications, awash with military curios and tasteful Victoriana.

The Doctor had just finished relating the conclusion to the siege of CosDiv HQ. Rerouting the cosmic turbines and opening the Einstein-Rosen bridge had done more than catapult Sarah Jane, Arthur, and the surviving Celts to the far ends of space-time. It had momentarily stunned even Archology One natives. Whether through his experience with such energies or his formidable Time Lord constitution, the Doctor proved immune to the effect.

Finding himself the only person conscious and mobile in the entire city, he seized the opportunity to secure Terrance Goodkyne. Upon recovering, consistent with his words from their meeting at Directorate HQ, Goodkyne had placed self-preservation above all else and ordered his forces to stand down and withdraw.

"And you think Archology One's people will do well in their new world?" The Brigadier inquired.

"At their levels of technology and efficiency, I have no doubt. And a normal sun means their solar arrays can yield all the energy they'll ever need. With no more need to hive-up, they've already spread across Britain. They're working on migrating the other archologies' populations to their new world. Still, with an entire planet to explore and develop, they'll have their hands full for a very long time." With the Doctor's formal report concluded, it was UNIT's turn to do the updating.

"Between UNIT, the military, and the police, we had two dozen fatalities dealing with the disturbances. And about the same number of civilians," Sergeant Benton reported. "We should probably count ourselves lucky it wasn't more. Unfortunately, the casualties include a member of the peerage who was eaten by a sabre-tooth tiger, which is proving, err, challenging to explain."

"And we have located this Linus Venkatagiri of yours," Captain Yates informed the Doctor. "He is a lecturer in theoretical physics at Cambridge. As per your request, we are considering how best to approach him regarding recruitment into UNIT's science section. That should be quite a step up for him."

"Cambridge might disagree," the Doctor observed wryly. "So might his counterpart from Archology One. They seem to have had their fill of directors. Terrance Goodkyne is facing a thorough inquiry on his conduct as director. For now, Scientist Venkatagiri, Information Specialist Smith, and General Lethbridge-Stewart are managing their society as a kind of technocratic triumvirate."

Potent silence fell over the parlor. "I suppose we might as well come to it," the Brigadier said reluctantly. "Any word of Miss Smith?"

"I've searched for Sarah at every opportunity," the Doctor shook his

head. “It’s difficult to describe the enormity of that task, even for me, without resorting to the kind of math your Dr. Hadley relishes. Searching for a single person amongst all of space-time? It’s not looking for a needle in a haystack. It’s looking for a needle in a planet made of hay. So, I’m afraid things aren’t very hopeful.” Knowing the Doctor’s penchant for understatement, the UNIT personnel took his meaning somberly.

“I could use a brandy,” the Brigadier stoically proclaimed, nodding toward Sergeant Benton.

Tipping out five glasses, the sergeant distributed four of them before raising his own. “To Miss Sarah Jane,” he proffered. As the most junior soldier present, offering the toast violated protocol. Not even the Brigadier objected as they raised their glasses to join his.

The Doctor told himself that it didn’t affect him the same way it did the others. It wasn’t her loss itself that saddened him. A Time Lord accepted that mortal friends eventually stayed behind, grew old, and died. Even if it was harder than usual to think those words about Sarah Jane Smith. Very much harder, in fact. What really tugged at his hearts was the lost potential. The knowledge that the universe would be better off if Sarah wasn’t stranded on some obscure galactic backwater. If she still lived at all. And the realization that his life would have been better off, too, with Sarah Jane Smith in it for as long as possible. For the first time in a very long while, the Doctor was conscious of fighting back a tear.

Still, there was a universe out there that required saving. And a lot of clean-up here. As the UNIT officers moved to the remaining point on the agenda, the Doctor thought that putting things right in Sarah’s world, in Sarah’s London, was the finest tribute he could offer his friend.

A final loose end remained to the affair: those trespassers from other Londons that UNIT either couldn’t or wouldn’t send home. Perhaps UNIT had allowed compassion to triumph over prudence, but one group had been permitted to stay. Fleeing a London blanketed by eternal night and caught in a three-way war between an immortal Ripper’s progeny, the Mole People of the Underground, and minions of a certain Carfax Abbey resident, the refugees’ ultimate liberty was conditional upon extensive debriefing and legally-binding oaths of silence.

Even more problematic were the Blackshirts and Templars. UNIT did not relish the idea of them returning home with tales of alternate realities and the possibility of traveling between them. Instead, they would become the latest residents of Project Pitcairn, the codename for several UNIT-controlled islands concealed among the Pacific’s vast expanse. The two groups would join a number of other involuntary guests already living out their days there in relative comfort with the rest of the world none the wiser.

Discussions of transport, supply, and infrastructure for those “guests” ceased awkwardly as the office’s manservant poked his head through the parlor door. Selected for his unique combination of impeccable references in domestic service and knowledge of ways to kill, armed or unarmed, he remained decorously silent awaiting

acknowledgement.

"Gervais," the Brigadier snapped, "I gave clear instruction we were not to be disturbed."

"I'm sorry, Sir," Gervais replied with perfect civility but no other discernable emotion. "I wasn't given a…"

"I didn't give him a choice," Sarah Jane's voice cut him off as she elbowed her way into the room.

"Sarah Jane Smith, as I live and breathe," Sergeant Benton exclaimed.

"Well done, Sarah. Magnificent, in fact," the Doctor said admiringly, his that's impressive, period, expression on full display. "But how?"

"You needn't have worried, Doctor," she replied warmly yet with the tiniest note of pique. "Clever creatures always find their way home." Pushing the door further ajar, Sarah Jane glanced over her shoulder, "Come along, Arthur."



3. TRAVEL

Flow

Niki Haringsma

Sarah Jane stood squinting into her pocket mirror, trying to wrestle a rogue eyelash back into single file, when she saw the Doctor's reflection already saunter out of the TARDIS.

"I'll just be a moment!" she called out, before deciding that the little hair had lived long enough and putting it out of its misery with a quick pull. She tucked her mirror and mascara bottle back into her jacket, cast a quick glance at the murky scanner screen and dashed after her friend.

The world outside the TARDIS was lit only by the console room's white glow. Sarah Jane found the Doctor standing stock-still when she stepped out through the doors, his head tilted back, the cramped space beyond him hidden by his beanstalk frame. She squished herself around his layers of coat and scarf to get a better look.

"You've landed us in a cupboard." She laughed, relieved to see nothing more menacing than shelves and pots lining the shadowed walls.

"Do you know," he replied, prodding at the low ceiling. "It's remarkable, Sarah, but do you know, I think you're almost entirely wrong!" He ignored the look she shot him and tore a clump out from the blur above his head.

Sarah Jane peered closer as he moved his hand down to her face, the stringy mass between his fingers glistening in the TARDIS light. "Organic," he elaborated, rubbing the threads together discerningly. "Soft as silk."

"A cupboard made of silk, then," Sarah Jane said, and turned her back to the Doctor to explore further. "Like the inside of a big cocoon." The floor curved slightly up under her boots. She felt the surface yielding to her weight and sticking to her soles, and steadied herself along the walls as she took small steps forwards.

The ridges on either side, made of the same silky stuff, held more pots as well as boxes and rough fabrics bound with thread. A layer of delicate web-

bing locked the collection into place.

"It's a bit rickety for a cupboard, I'll admit," she added, finding that she could make the whole room seesaw when she shifted her weight left to right. "And is it me, or are we moving? I feel some kind of movement in my gut, like when you're in a lift, don't you?"

"Oh, a cocoon, indeed," the Doctor muttered. "Riding on the wind." She could hear him fidgeting with lids and hmm-ing to himself. "Which begs the question, of course, of what we'll have become once we emerge."

Sarah Jane's eyes found a neat crack of light. "Let's find out," she said with a grin, pushing against the ropy surface in front of her. The crack hinged open into a child-sized hatch. She blinked against the bright new light source as she knelt.

The Doctor reached her with three wobbly steps. "Well, what can you see?" he asked, his voice eager.

Carefully, she curled her fingers around the rim and stuck out her head—and cold vertigo gripped her chest at the sight of the endless, empty sky below.

"It's…beautiful," she replied after a moment. She tried to mentally shoo her body's panic response away. "Blue sky as far as the eye can see. And…" Squinting, she peered into the distance. "Tiny drifting islands. Hanging in the air, like bubbles in a fizzy drink!"

"Marvellous!" the Doctor said. "What about our relative position, so to speak?"

"I think you were right just now, about us drifting. But…" She looked around to see what moved the pod they'd found themselves in.

The outside seemed to be made of the same materials, a silvery organic mesh of strands covering untreated timber. Two ropes extended from either side of the door. Sarah Jane followed them up with her gaze and saw the two lines converge with others, knotted together just above the skycart's edge.

Tethered to the mess of wood and silk by a thick harness was a monstrous shape, fluttering straight above her.

Sarah Jane let out an undignified squeak when she saw the creature. It reminded her of a moth the size of a big dog, its tapered wings draped gracefully across green-and-gold fur. But the insect's waist was segmented and, she noticed with a shudder, its six limbs were simultaneously mantis-like and humanoid. It was staring straight down at her, its compound eyes glistening with intelligence.

"Hello!" the Doctor's voice called out beside her. "Hello, madam, good day!" He wriggled his head out through the hatch as best he could, his dark curls smushed against Sarah Jane's shoulder. "My friend Sarah and I seem to have become accidental stowaways in your cart here, haven't we, Sarah?"

"Oh, yes," Sarah Jane added, gathering herself. "I'm sorry if we've given you a scare. Sometimes our ship picks the most inconvenient places to land!"

The insect looked at them with open fear, unmoving aside from the steady beat of her wings. "What…are you?" she asked, her hum of a voice barely audible.

"Who, if that's quite all right with you," Sarah Jane responded. She forced a smile. "My name is Sarah

Jane Smith, and this is the Doctor. We're not from around here, you see."

"I…my name is Arren," the alien woman said, her words shaking. "Please be quiet. Please."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry. I didn't realise." Sarah Jane lowered her voice, remembering how sensitive some otherworldly species were to sound. "Is this better? Could you maybe tell us where we are?"

"You have to go back inside." Arren's tone became a frantic whisper. "You have to, please. Right now."

The Doctor stuck his head out slightly further. "We've heard that before. Haven't we heard that one before, Sarah?"

"Oh, indeed," Sarah Jane said, nodding. While she didn't want to intrude, her curiosity was quickly winning out now. "Say," she added, "we'll go back inside in just a moment, but is there nothing else up here? I don't see a single—"

Her words were cut short. Two more of the moth-like creatures shot out abruptly from behind the pod. Their bodies and wings were much larger than Arren's, ghostly white forms bloodshot with branching redness.

Sarah Jane heard the Doctor mutter a quick "Ah, yes, I see…" beside her. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the scene unfolding above. As she watched Arren flutter in panic, the two strangers closed in wordlessly.

Arren faced the nearest one. "I've never been scared of drones. Not before and not now," she spat. "And if you take me, I promise Jianna will *kill* you. She'll hunt you down and tear you limb from limb."

Her assailants both stayed silent. They hung in the air, their bodies tense and ready to strike.

"You tell the ascendant that we're coming," Arren called out. Her trembling voice rang with defiance. "We'll find them. All of us who are still left. We'll find them, and we'll gut them like the cowards they are. Make them pay for what they've done to all of—"

"Arren, *dive!*"

The Doctor's warning came too late. Sarah Jane watched helplessly as one of the drones swooped in and latched onto Arren's back, cutting through several of the reins at once.

One side of the pod sank from under her legs and she found herself crying out in shock, clinging to the Doctor's arms to keep her balance.

At the sound of Sarah Jane's scream, the drone turned towards the door. The blank alien eyes found her own, without the faintest sign of either fear or wonder—and before she could even think to move, the creature had let go of Arren and sat perched on the pod's outer wall, reaching for her through the opening.

Sarah Jane jerked her arm away in reflex. "Not likely!" she yelled, pushing against the Doctor in an attempt to flee back inside. She was too slow—three of the drone's serrated limbs shot out to grab her by her sleeve.

Beyond the drone, she caught a glimpse of Arren diving down. The pod's sudden fall pushed the door's frame roughly against her shoulder. Hard chitin dug into her skin, the creature deflecting the Doctor's attempts to drag her back to safety.

The reins still tied to Arren's harness took in the slack and pulled taut, and the pod slammed hard against something outside—the other drone,

Sarah Jane realised as the impact rang through her. The floor lurched and the open door dipped down to face the empty air below.

"Sarah, now! Get back in!" the Doctor cried out. "It seems we're not wanted here!"

The world tilted while she managed to pull free of the drone's grip. She felt herself slip forward, suspended above the endless blue for just one frozen moment, the Doctor screaming and scrambling and grabbing for her ankles.

He was too late.

The pod shot up into the distance as she slid out and fell, her friend's cries of "Sarah! Sarah!" snatched away by the wind.

It took her only seconds to stop screaming. There was no point to it, she thought, wasting her breath against the sky. If this was it, then she'd lived a good life—a life with friends and family, with outer space adventures and quiet days of joy alike. She'd walked into danger and faced it bravely.

Her mind raced with possible regrets, with sounds and scents of home, with images of herself hitting the ground below and shattering apart. She shut it all down. If these were to be her final moments alive, she wanted more than anything to be present for them.

She twisted her body in the air, fighting against the terror in her gut, to look down at what awaited her.

Glimpses of land raced by her in clumps. The closest ones looked like smears of rock and green floating steadily in the blue nothing. The sky further away showed larger islands, specked across the world as far as she could see.

Below her, through the harsh wind tearing into her eyes, all she could make out was endless space.

She could fall forever.

Something in the corner of her eye fluttered.

She turned her head towards the shape instinctively, but her body tumbled the other way, pulled sideways in the air.

Her fingers brushed against string, a sticky touch like running into spider webs, and even as she jerked her hand up to her chest she felt the thread resisting. A mass of silk formed rapidly around her arms and legs. She spluttered as it touched her nose, unable to move her arm far enough to wipe it off.

"Stop moving, please, just stop!"

Startled by the voice, Sarah Jane looked around for its source. Whoever had spoken stayed out of sight, but the silk continued to wrap itself around her. It tugged her body this way and that, randomly at first, then swinging into determined patterns.

The world around her was no longer shooting upwards. Chunks of land now drifted past at leisure. Sarah Jane was gliding, wrapped up in a makeshift cocoon that slowed her fall more and more with each passing second.

She allowed herself to breathe in carefully. Her arms and legs relaxed inside the wrappings, and the cold terror running through her veins made way for relief.

The wild swinging became smoother as her rescuer dragged her sideways. She managed to lift her head enough to see the fluttering of wings. Thick insect limbs held on to the strings a ways above her body, carrying her towards one of the floating

isles.

When they reached land, the bundle enveloping her was lowered to the ground more gently than she'd dared hope for. The insect's arms cut through the silk around her with ease.

As she sat up and brushed away the final threads clinging to her jacket, her rescuer stepped back to gaze at her in wonder.

Sarah Jane closed her eyes and rubbed them, hard. After a few deep breaths she looked up again, planted her hands on the dusty ground and pushed herself to her feet.

It took her a moment to find her balance. The sky-isle's gravity was lighter than what she was used to. But she could stand and, against all odds, she was still alive.

She looked over to the being scuttering around beside her. Its silvery, alien form looked much like Arren's. Although smaller, its full wingspan still seemed to be the size of a grown human.

Forcing herself to stay calm, she looked down into the insect's compound eyes and realised she'd probably do well to break the ice.

"You, um…"

She trailed off. With all the questions racing through her mind, she couldn't think of where to start. After a moment, she smiled and simply went with introductions.

"Thank you," she said. She considered extending a hand but decided against it. "My…my name is Sarah Jane Smith. What's yours?"

"Can you understand me?" The voice was rough, quivering as the words rushed out.

Sarah Jane blinked. "Yes, I suppose I can."

"No time to explain," the insect replied. "Just come with me. Call me Jianna."

"Jianna?" It took a moment for the name to click. "Oh! That's right, Arren mentioned you!" *Will kill you,* her memory added instantly. *She'll hunt you down and tear you limb from limb.*

The alien woman jumped up and rose into the air just inches above Sarah Jane's face. Her tapered wing tips trailed across the ground. "I don't know *what* you are, but Arren said—she said you were innocent."

"Said? But…" Sarah Jane blinked again. Her mind was racing to think of an escape plan, unsure what or whom to trust. "But Arren was arrested, wasn't she? She…how could she have told you?"

Jianna looked towards the sky distractedly. "Just the link," she said. She flapped her wings and, moments later, turned away from the isle's edge to fly inland.

Sarah Jane followed as quickly as she could, her lungs tingling with the rich air all around her. Her legs struggled with the lightness of her body in this world's gravity. "Wait," she yelled out, "Jianna, wait!"

She slowed down as the woman lowered herself beside a small hill. "What do you mean, the link?" she asked. "Where are we going, what's—"

"No time," Jianna repeated. Her antennae prodded at the overgrown earth in front of her. "We talk, Arren and I. Lifemates can. When we're apart."

"Oh! You mean, like telepathy?"

Jianna hummed, her head now pressed against the hill. "You don't need to explain. I know some unwinged things don't talk like us.

Whatever you are, you're not—you're not *normal*."

Something shifted in the earth and the woman flew up again, twisting around to look back to where they'd come from. "Clear," she told Sarah Jane with relief. "No one saw us. Get in."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Into the earth." Jianna moved one front limb towards the wall. It retreated at her touch, a small circular hole opening up as if repulsed by her. "We can hide there. The others, as long as we can still resist, we hide there from the drones, from the—the people who took Arren."

Her voice broke as she said the name, and Sarah Jane felt a sudden pang of sympathy. She could see that the woman was barely holding herself together.

"Jianna," she said gently, "I don't know anything about what's going on. But I want to trust you. I want to hear your story, alright?" She locked eyes with Jianna, seeing her own, pale face reflected in the compound shapes. "I want to hear about the ascendant, and the drones, and about what you're fighting for. I want to help."

"Get in," Jianna repeated. Her voice still betrayed her panic, but she eyed Sarah Jane more intently now. "Please."

"Well, alright," Sarah Jane said. "I…suppose I will, then."

She touched a finger to the earthen wall and watched as the soil opened to greet her. Slowly, she extended her arm, carefully at first but with more confidence when the hole in front of her grew larger. She looked over to Jianna. The woman was already nearly swallowed up by the hillside and moments later, the earth closed up around her back limbs seamlessly.

Sarah Jane took a deep breath, her hand still hovering in the air. Hesitating, she looked back to the sky, just to see if the Doctor might magically drop down beside her. There wasn't any sign of life between the island dots.

"Oh well," she said quietly to herself. "In for a penny…"

She closed her eyes and stepped straight into the wall. Around her was just emptiness. Two steps further, she heard Jianna's legs scuttering beside her again, and she opened her eyes with relief to see where she'd ended up.

The space in front of them was dark. Small, flesh-toned bulbs dotted the walls and ceiling, giving off just enough light for Sarah Jane to make out the hideout's features. It was closer to a hive than a room, an organic mass of ridges and holes carved into the earth.

Jianna fluttered away towards the opposite wall. "Din," she called out. "I'm here. I'm back, they—the drones, they took Arren." She spoke quickly, her words tumbling over each other. "I brought some—someone."

Sarah Jane followed on closely. As she stepped around empty boxes and broken jars, she found herself thinking of circus tents long after a show, of warehouses abandoned in a rush. The air around her carried a rotten stench.

A groan came from a niche up near the ceiling, faintly, as if begging for them to come closer. Jianna landed upside down near the hole and scurried in. Sounds of low conversation broke the silence, drifting down to floor level but never quite crystallising into words.

It didn't take Sarah Jane long to get fidgety. She tried an experimental hop or two, but although she jumped higher than she could have on earth, it wasn't nearly enough to reach the insects.

Once she lost her patience, she moved carefully away from the high wall, deciding to explore the space a little. If Jianna refused to be forthcoming with information, she would simply find out for herself.

The light flickered on the debris strewn across the floor. Every step took her closer to the odd stench's source. She covered her nose with her sleeve—its leatherette in tatters where the drone had grabbed it earlier—and peered around to see what else the room contained.

There was no furniture to speak of, at least not in human terms, but here and there she found half-eaten stems littering the ground. Small bones crunched under her shoes.

Further still, the piles of crates, glass containers and silken sacks became less chaotic. A curtain had been strung up between stacked supplies. Whatever was behind it seemed responsible for the bad air—the pungent smell cut straight through her sleeve and found its way into her throat. She coughed and pulled aside the fabric with her free arm, determined not to let herself be frightened.

Somewhere behind her, she could still hear Jianna's voice.

The curtained-off space seemed empty at first. But as she blinked into the darkness, Sarah Jane started to make out shapes.

Most of them lay prone on the floor. Others were draped across each other. The things were covered in silken string, but she could make out gaps in the webbing, black blotches showing through.

Despite herself, she couldn't help but step closer.

Two of the things in front of her lay wrapped up together. A bundle was held between them, a rigid cylinder wrapped in silk with rows of stubby outgrowths all along its side.

Sarah Jane made to touch it, her fingers inches from the small shape before she realised what she was seeing—a wrapped-up body, a larva, a *child*.

She stepped back in horror. The burning stench inside her throat nearly made her retch. She could recognise the outlines of other bodies now, of their legs and wings and faces. Some clutched their dead loved ones in their limbs, but the majority of them were alone, half-wrapped, unmoving.

A scuttering sound came from just behind her.

"It's too late."

Sarah Jane turned around sharply to see Jianna standing there, trembling like a leaf.

"It's too late," the woman repeated. "We're too late. Din's, he's…he's dead too."

"Jianna," Sarah Jane whispered. "What happened to this place?" She swallowed. "To these people?"

"And Arren's been taken and I'm alone and stuck with, with you, and I don't know what you *are* and—"

"Jianna, please." Sarah Jane's heart hammered in her chest. She let herself sink down to the woman's height. "You have to tell me what's going on. I can't help anyone if I don't know."

A long moment passed as Jianna gathered herself. Eventually she raised

her head towards Sarah Jane, her eyes reflecting the weak light. Her whole body shivered as she spoke.

"It's all been so much at once," she started softly. "I don't think it's been more than four-six nights." She scratched at her face with one long limb. "The ascendant disappeared. Just like that."

Sarah Jane touched Jianna's shoulder in sympathy. The fur felt hot and damp under her fingers. "Go on," she said.

"Just before the first of us got sick, we'd asked to talk to the ascendant one last time. To make something better out of our world. Ask them to treat us as living, thinking beings. Stop the conflicts once and for all." The alien paused to steady her breathing. "Our mother, she used to tell Din and me about childish dreams like those, from back in her own days. About half-formed plans to make the ascendant listen. Making our world a different place. Nothing ever came of it. Sticky tales for wingless children, she called them. But we thought, we genuinely thought we could convince them to…" She trailed off as her voice caught in her throat.

"Your enemy left you, then?" Sarah Jane asked after a moment, mentally connecting all the dots. "These ascendant, you'd been at war with them?"

"No. They were our rulers." Jianna's tongue shot out briefly and disappeared again, as if in a spasm, before she continued. "The…they made us keep them fed for generations. If we tried to flee, to disobey, they breached our minds and burned us from inside."

"They *burned* you?"

"And the drones, their caste always claimed they needed orders to know where to fight, where to hunt, to keep us safe from worse things. They feared they couldn't live without the ascendant but in the end they all came so close to joining us, to standing up to the ascendant and…" A shudder ran across her wings. "And then our whole world, it just…it broke. The plague came. The drones went silent when it spread. Turned mindless. Hunted us, took our families away. Like they did Arren. And the ascendant—" she caught herself. "No, not ascendant, are they? The *dirt*. The filthy *dirt* just disappeared. Children and all. Left us to rot."

Sarah Jane had a million more questions on her lips. But the stench from the bodies was digging its way into her mind, and the dark hideout started to feel like it was squeezing in around her.

"Jianna," she said resolutely. "We need to leave. We need to take the risk. My friend, the Doctor, he was still with Arren when I fell." She noticed Jianna flinching at her lifemate's name, but pressed on, taking hold of the woman's foremost limb. "We have to rescue them both, don't you see? I know it's hard, I know it seems impossible. But we have to try. Staying down here could be our death!"

There was no response. With sudden realisation, Sarah Jane moved her hand across Jianna's fur to feel her dry face, her red-hot brow. "You're infected," she whispered.

"Just leave me. Just get out, there's nothing for you here."

"You're right," Sarah Jane said, feeling more determined by the second. "You know what? I *will* get out.

And I'm taking you with me."

She stood up and marched over to the nearest wall, only a few feet away from where she'd knelt. It showed no signs of any exit, but she prodded at sections of the dark earth until it budged, a new gap opening to accommodate her.

Quickly, she grabbed a broken box from the floor and put it by the wall to mark the spot. She walked back to Jianna, crouched down and wriggled her arms underneath the chitinous body.

Groans of protest came of out the woman's mouth. Sarah Jane ignored them as she stood up and, thankfully, found the weight easy enough to bear in the low gravity.

The wall ebbed away at her approach. Fresh air and sunlight greeted her a few steps later. She drew deep, grateful breaths to rinse the rot out from her lungs.

A quick glance at the sky told her they were still alone. She knelt and placed Jianna down on the grass, careful not to twist the fragile joints. Out in the daylight, she could see the sickness pulsing through the woman's body, a redness spreading from her dark mouth along the branching patterns of her wings.

"Jianna," she said softly, "listen to me. You have to contact Arren. Remotely, like you told me before. We need to find her and the Doctor."

"Too far away," Jianna groaned. "Can't hear her, can't reach her now." Her back gave a feverish shudder. "Unless…"

"Unless what?"

"I need to…need to try."

The woman folded her six limbs up underneath herself, laid down her head and pushed her antennae flat across her scalp. Her whole body trembled.

Slowly, then with increasing momentum, waves of sound rose up around her.

The rhythmic pulse filled Sarah Jane's chest. It coiled around her body, seeped into her mind, took away her breath.

She clamped her hands over her ears, to no avail. "Jianna," she managed between gasps, "what are you *doing!?*"

Jianna's voice melted into the horrifying throb. "I'm calling out to Arren." Thin words sounded, seeming to come as much from the woman as from inside Sarah Jane's own throat. "I'm reaching out to her, just like you said I should. This scream is for her. And for anyone else who can hear me." The noise drilled into the ground beneath them. "Let them come. Let them take me. Let me feel her one last time before I'm dead!"

The last Sarah Jane saw of the floating island was its quaking edge, giving way to the pale shapes of a dozen drones. The earth shot up and slammed into her teeth. Her mouth was filled with dry gravel, hard bits of dirt that clung to her tongue when she instinctively spat, and her eyes struggled to focus on the figure abruptly hovering in front of her—two long stalks of red and gold extending from worn shoes, planted sideways against the world.

"Ah, Sarah!" she heard the figure call out. His words squeezed into her head from all around her. She blinked hard against the pain. The world tilted with rough jolts when she opened her eyes again, gravity tugging at her gut and twisting the Doctor's legs upright

in front of her.

"You've been out for a long time," he started, each syllable a hammer in her skull. "Hours, I should say. Can you stand up?"

Sarah Jane lifted one hand up from the floor to shush him. She caught a blotched glimpse of him kneeling by her side as her hand fell onto her face instead, and she moved her fingers down to pluck her tongue clean. Flecks of the Doctor's features dripped into the colours of moth fur. His words hummed on around her ears.

She blinked again.

The world decided to play nice. Her view resolved into a well-lit room, the merged blob by her side separating to reveal the Doctor and Jianna. No, not Jianna—Sarah Jane's eyes focused on the green markings criss-crossing the woman's fur and the pod harness still strapped to her body.

"…Arren?"

"I can't, I can't stay and watch," Arren responded. She sounded even more scared than when Sarah Jane had first seen her, and turned around to half-fly out of sight.

"I'm afraid our other revolutionary friend is still out for the count," the Doctor explained from far above. "Arren's been trying to heal her. Or rather, I should say, to absorb the plague straight out of her body. Which I wouldn't recommend as a course of action for anyone, but you can't stop love, of course, can you?"

Sarah Jane considered replying, but between her throbbing headache and the disgusting taste still lingering in her mouth she decided the effort could wait. She raised herself a little on one elbow and took in their surroundings.

The circular space was enclosed by wooden grating, with glowing balls of grass-like matter stuffed between some of the gaps to provide light. The floor seemed to be made of wood as well, a solid block merging into the walls.

A blur of shapes against the wall revealed itself to be Jianna when Sarah Jane looked closer. Gently, Arren touched her antennae to those of her lifemate, letting out a pained yelp as their bodies made contact.

"Not very swish, this place, is it?" Sarah Jane managed with a small smile. She accepted the Doctor's outstretched hand and clambered to her feet. The pain between her eyes softened obligingly as she found her balance.

"Oh, I shouldn't say so, no," her friend replied. He smiled back while she tested her legs a moment and found them both still in working order.

"I think I could build a more invigorating jail cell standing on my head," he continued. "The company is dreadful, can't get a word out of them, and here I've been trying to get them to bring us buttered croissants and metsovone ever since Arren and I were brought in—isn't that right, fellows?"

Following his gaze, Sarah Jane could make out half a dozen insect shapes beyond the cell's boundaries. The drones seemed to ignore them, standing just out of reach and staring at them vacantly.

"Oh, but I think that one's leg twitched a little just now," she told the Doctor with a smile. "You must be getting into their heads."

Part of her was relieved to have landed in a familiar jail-cells-and-unsociable-guards kind of problem. She allowed herself to relax a moment as the Doctor slid down to the floor,

resting his back against the wall with his legs splayed out lazily before him.

The meshed wood separating their cell from the dark space beyond was irregular, seemingly grown into its shape rather than carved. With her fingers hooked into its gaps for support, she closed her eyes and focused on her breathing. Waves of dizziness came to wash over her as she stood there—heavy ones at first, then a gentle lapping, making way for clarity.

She gave her head a shake to clear the final mental cobwebs, opened her eyes again and turned to look down at the Doctor.

"Right," she said resolutely. "So, I assume you've tried our usual escape ploys already?"

"But of course," the Doctor replied. He grinned up at her. "All our practical protocols poked and prodded. The walls won't budge and neither will the guards. It's surprisingly tricky, you know, baiting your jailers when they don't seem to be aware of their own jail."

"Just our luck. And from the looks of it, the old sick prisoner routine is out of the question too." She sighed. "Any sign yet of these mysterious ascendant?"

"Hmm?"

"The local caste of bullies," Sarah Jane elaborated. Her fingers tapped out a little rhythm against the wood. "Didn't Arren tell you?"

The Doctor shook his head. "She hasn't been in a very informative mood so far."

Sarah Jane glanced over to Arren and Jianna, still huddled together. "Of course," she replied gently. "Well. It's this group of psychic hoity-toities, you see, apparently with a habit of torturing dissenters from the inside out. They up and left as soon as this sickness arrived."

The Doctor arched an eyebrow. "Psychic, eh? Are they really, now?"

"Oh, yes! It seems these…well, moths, I suppose, can broadcast their thoughts. That's how the drones found me again, actually. Jianna sent out a mental signal strong enough to topple a—"

She stopped, resting her hands on her hips. "Doctor, are you even listening?"

The Doctor had closed his eyes while she spoke. His face was screwed up in concentration. "I am, Sarah," he said in a low tone. "I'm listening to many things." He bit his lip, wagging his chin up and down as if trying to find a radio signal.

"Well? Care to share with the class?"

"As I thought," he said. He let himself slowly slide further onto the hard floor, until he was lying down rather than sitting. "I've always been quite adept at picking up these psychic vibrations, you see. Plucking them effortlessly out of the air, so to speak."

Sarah Jane suppressed a snort. She decided to forego calling the Doctor out on his self-aggrandisement and skip to the good bits instead. "And what can your mighty Time Lord brain detect?" she asked.

"A quiet life elsewhere."

"I'm sorry?"

"An escape. True freedom. Infinite control." The soft words tumbled from the Doctor's lips, but his expression had gone vacant.

"Doctor," Sarah Jane said, "are you feeling quite all right?" She bent down for a closer look. It was no use—his

trance seemed complete, and his mouth now moved without making any sound at all.

"Typical," she muttered. "Just what I needed." She stood up to address the unmoving guards, staring straight into the blank eyes of the one nearest to her. "And what am I supposed to do," she asked bitingly, "just sit pretty until these mighty ascendant of yours come and fetch us? And then what? Come on, you lot, why won't you *say* something?"

"Please be quiet. Please."

Sarah Jane turned to see Arren looking at her pleadingly. The woman's appearance was horrid—the small body had taken on the same sickly hue as Jianna's, a deep red that flowed out from her torso through the veins across her wings.

"I'm…sorry," Sarah Jane managed. She stepped over to the two. "I'm really sorry. About everything. I just wish I knew how to help."

Arren had already placed both of her antennae back on Jianna's cheeks. With obvious pain, she sucked the plague into herself, the redness dripping into her face and fur.

"But you don't," she told Sarah Jane bitterly between laboured breaths. "You don't."

Sarah Jane knelt down, embarrassed. Jianna's form lay limp on the ground before her.

"I don't know what to do," Arren said. She sounded frantic. "It's not working. I can't draw it all out of her, it keeps getting worse and I don't have the strength, it's burning me up and it's—it's no use, is it?"

As gently as she could, Sarah Jane placed a hand between the woman's wings. "Just stay by her side," she replied.

Arren's head didn't move, but Sarah still saw the compound eye glistening, its closest facets locking on to her. The soft back trembled under her fingertips.

"Just stay with her, Arren," Sarah Jane repeated, her voice low with anger. "That's what matters. Someone else can save the world today. Jianna needs you right here. And she loves you, and nothing can come between that, do you hear me? Nothing."

Arren tore herself away from Sarah Jane's touch, breaking contact with Jianna again as she turned around. "Someone else?" she spat out. "Who? Go on then, who? There's no one else left, no one left alive to fight and you know it!"

"I, I didn't mean—"

"We're going to die here, Jianna's going to die and it will all have been for nothing. Everything we did. Everything we tried."

"*No!*"

Sarah Jane surprised herself when she spoke. "No," she repeated more firmly, looking Arren straight in the eyes. "I'm going to get us out of here. Oh, you just watch! I'm *done* being dragged along by other people's whims!"

She stood up and took stock. The Doctor was still splayed across the floor, out for the count. Arren turned her own attentions to Jianna again.

All around them, the guards had moved in closer. The pale shapes were pressed up against the cell now, the redness on their wings visibly throbbing, their antennae reaching through the gaps along the wood.

Sarah Jane saw her chance. With two quick steps, she reached the near-

est drone and wrapped her hand around the milk-white feelers.

"Alright, you!" she started. The segments felt strange, clutched in her fist. "I'll tell you what's going to happen. You're going to contact these ascendant of yours, and you tell them to show their faces, if they dare. And another thing, you're going to get help for my friends, whatever they need to survive! Do you understand?"

"Grabbing this body," the drone replied, unflinching.

"Yes. Yes, that's right. Are you finally waking up now? So this what it takes, is it?"

"The body is safe," the drone continued, ignoring her question. "Can we stay for now? Yes, yes, yes yes yes there is no threat. No need to worry, no need to rush."

Sarah Jane hesitated. "Hello?" she asked. "Can you even hear me, or are you just babbling to yourself?"

"Free now," the voice spoke. "Remove it."

A hellish pain shot through her guts and tore a scream out from her throat, and she felt herself losing her balance again as she shut her eyes in reflex, freefalling through the air as if she were still tumbling down between the floating isles.

Something large and padded broke her fall. She rolled to the side with a groan, and opened her eyes to see her legs parked across the Doctor's chest. The drone's psychic blast had sent her flying across the cell.

Wincing, Sarah Jane scrambled to her knees and shook her friend. "Doctor," she said, "come *on*. We have to do *something*."

"Can't go back, won't go back," he responded dreamily, his eyes still closed. "To all their endless *questions*. All their endless *wants*. This tiny life is quiet, oh, so quiet. Where to, where to now? The drones will not sustain us for much longer," he mumbled. "But! No! The worker bodies drink us like a poison," he immediately countered himself, the words tumbling out in quick succession.

"Doctor, can't you snap out of it? Please, if you can hear me, can you just try?"

"But this one's nice," the Doctor's lips spoke. "So nice. His skin close to bursting with energy. Golden light that could renew us, feed us, be our home, golden light to store us, carry us, nurture the children, golden—"

With a shock, the Doctor's eyes opened wide. His hand shot out and grabbed Sarah Jane's arm, his expression desperate.

She almost screamed. His mouth was still moving wildly at her, but he managed to suppress the words, contorting his lips until they obeyed him again.

"Sarah, it's," he told her, each syllable a struggle. "It's. They. The children, we can use the, golden, we—"

He bashed the back of his head onto the ground, hard. "Sarah," he forced out, "they want to take over my *veins*."

"Your what!?"

"They want to—" He swallowed. "Plan to *live* in there. Instead of in the, the, the and we can finally have peace, finally bask in the quiet of the—"

He clamped his hand over his mouth.

Sarah Jane gaped at him. "The ascendant," she managed. "Doctor, it's the ascendant in there, isn't it? Inside the moths?"

"They don't know I'm listening,

Sarah," he said, his voice muffled by his fingers.

"Oh, Doctor, they must have made themselves so small. Just to get away from everything…"

"But they," he continued, "they want to move into my body, want to get out of the drones and out of the workers and set up a new life inside of *me!*"

"Hold on," Sarah Jane said, "do you mean *all* of them?"

He gave her an odd look. "Sarah," he gasped suddenly. "Sarah, yes! You've got it! If I could absorb all of them at once, before they're ready, if I—"

"If you what?"

"The whole lot of them, at the same time, to make, make, to make them—oh, stop distracting me with your chatter, Sarah, I'm trying to form a psychic funnel!"

Sarah Jane watched helplessly as his face contorted. A strange glint just above her caught her eye.

As she looked up, she saw the guards all around the cell shifting and quavering where they stood. More of them had appeared out of the darkness, a dozen pairs of eyes now pressed up against the wall. Thin waves of red emanated from their branching veins, gliding from the pale bodies to the Doctor's skin.

Down on the floor, Arren and Jianna silently clung to each other. Their sickness seeped out slowly from their forms and merged with the strange patterns in the air.

"Doctor," Sarah Jane started, lowering her head to dodge the swarming specks. "I can see what you're doing, but I'm not so sure if it's a good idea!"

"Our path is clear!" the Doctor's voice roared out. "His golden body will be our new home, but no, no, it's too fast! Too soon! Too, too, too, yes, Sarah! It's working! But—"

"What? Tell me, what is it?"

His face knotted every which way. Drops of sweat were beading on his forehead. "The psychic field, I need to concentrate, to make it stronger! To drag them out all at once, all of them from all across this world, and they, they, their voices, I can't *concentrate!*"

In a flash, Sarah Jane understood what had to be done. She took a deep breath. "Jianna," she said. "Arren, listen to me. I need you."

Arren raised her head slightly from Jianna's shoulder, her eyes glazed over with exhaustion. "Do you?" she moaned. "How?"

"You have to amplify the Doctor's signal." Sarah Jane licked her dry lips. "Please. Jianna told me that you're linked. Psychically, I mean, as lifemates. Can you do it together? Can you create a signal, one that will reach every ascendant on this world?"

Jianna jerked up at Sarah Jane's question, twitching back into consciousness. She touched her head briefly to Arren's to acknowledge her lifemate's startled response, then looked up at Sarah Jane.

"Yes," she said simply. "We can."

She took the lead, stroking Arren's antennae flat, wrapping her thin wings around them both. A deep roar started up once more from her body. The pulsating sound became a twinned oscillation between the two women, engulfing Sarah Jane and the Doctor, extending to the cell walls and the drones and quickly reaching far beyond.

Sarah Jane expected the ground to quake just as it had before, and braced

herself for the impact. This time, however, the signal was gentle—guided by the two women in unison, it moved with accuracy and grace. She felt herself enveloped by its psychic field, even as she ducked from the red specks dancing through the air.

"Good," the Doctor groaned from the floor. "Brilliant! Keep it up!" His face was twisted into a satisfied grin, his lips drawn back to show his teeth. "I bet you didn't expect *that*, did you, you contumelious little *monsters?*"

"Doctor," Sarah Jane said. "Can you hear me now? Is it working?"

"Come on, you all," he growled, still oblivious to her voice. "Show me what you're made of!"

Underneath the waves of noise coming from Arren and Jianna, Sarah Jane could hear another sound faintly rising, a chattering of voices that filled the air and itched inside her mind.

"Doctor," she said with apprehension. "I'm starting to hear them myself. They're…"

She realised she might as well be talking to the walls. Instead of trying to get through to her friend, she shut her eyes and listened closely.

The words were garbled, a cacophony of trills and clicks, but she could make out fragments flowing through. *Arrogant,* they spoke. *Smug. The mind's naïve. Heedless. Puffed up. Wide open.*

"You don't know the mistake you've just made!" the Doctor shouted. His tone turned to laughter, vicious and low. "Did you really think you could just barge in here and treat me like fodder?"

As she opened her eyes to look down again, Sarah Jane saw the red motes around him mingling with gold, a vivid energy wisping from his skin.

"*Doctor!*" she yelled. She grabbed his shoulders and shook him as hard as she could. "Oh, snap out of it already! This isn't about *you!*"

He angled his head towards her. His eyes were clear, and his face turned terrified in a split-second. "Sarah!" he gasped. "Container!"

"What!?"

"Jar! Vial! Flagon! Urn!" He pointed at his mouth frantically. "Right here! Alembic! Gourd! *Bottle!*"

Sarah Jane looked around frantically, to no avail. The cell didn't even have a bucket. She padded her jacket with both hands, trying to block out the Doctor's cries of sudden agony, and felt something hard inside her right pocket. A flat little mirror, and neatly tucked away behind that—

"I've got it," she breathed. She held up the black mascara bottle and yanked its brush out with enough force to speck the Doctor's coat. Steadying her hand as best she could, she held it up to her friend's reddened face.

"Doctor," she yelled. "Shove them out!"

Swept in, the chattering in her mind supplied. *Safe. Snug. Ours.*

"Doctor, *now!*"

The Doctor took a deep breath, and time seemed to stop in its tracks.

The ascendant voices went quiet all at once, cut off mid-word. A leaden weight fell across Sarah Jane's mind as the psychic energy hit a point of stillness—stunning everything that had been swept up in its waves.

The crest held, quivered, tilted back, and slowly, inevitably, began to crash back onto reality.

With a sigh, the Doctor's mind bore down on the ascendant. The roar oscil-

lating around his body slipped away. And finally, out from his throat and skin, a miniscule cloud of red mist was expelled with deft precision and found its way straight into Sarah Jane's bottle.

She willed her arms to move, clamped the lid back on and screwed it shut to trap the swarm inside.

It stayed put.

Exhausted, Sarah Jane slumped to the floor, holding the bottle snugly to her chest.

A high-pitched whine lingered in her ears. But as she steadied her breathing, the air around her filled with gentle mutterings as well—guards waking from their daze and turning to each other in surprise.

Beside her, the Doctor was babbling, still lying prone, explaining how, "I was only making them *think* they had the upper hand, you see, just as I planned all along!" with only the tiniest tremor in his voice.

"Well," Sarah Jane managed to say after long seconds. She saw Jianna standing up on wobbly legs, leaning on Arren, all bright and silver and without a trace of red. "Doctor, you know what?"

He turned his head towards her. "Yes, I mean, what?"

"We got them," Sarah Jane replied. "Doctor, we did it." She grinned at her friend and raised her hand to hold the bottle out to him. "Say…do you know of any nice, barren space rocks to dump a bunch of tiny tyrants on?"

"I do," he said, smiling back wolfishly. His skin was streaked with sweat, gleaming in the dim light. "I most certainly do. We could, couldn't we? Or…"

"…Or," she added, "shall we see what their former subjects have to say on the matter?"

"What a lovely idea," the Doctor mumbled. "In fact, I can't wait to see what our winged friends come up with." He reached out to curl his fingers around hers, pressing the bottle against her palm gently before his eyelids drooped shut again.

And as she lay there in the centre of that world's rebirth, the Doctor's warm hand resting on her own, Sarah Jane finally found herself laughing with relief—and thought she'd never stop.

Cuckoo Clocks that Work

James Macaronas

Sarah Jane realised that she'd given up on getting home.

She was fairly certain the Doctor hadn't had the slightest intention of ever taking her there, in spite of what he'd promised when they'd left Scotland. He was like that, in this new body—capricious. She would've said he was like a butterfly, but so often he felt like a bat, flitting about in the shadows of the new console room. She trusted him still, but not like before. Travelling with the Doctor felt different in a way it hadn't for…how long had it been anyway?

A tinny squeal broke the introspective silence and Sarah Jane rolled her eyes. She loved travelling with the Doctor—but why did he insist on playing the piccolo?

Sarah Jane trudged into the console room. The Doctor was perched on the edge of the console, in his shirtsleeves, fumbling with a piccolo. With a laugh, she realised he was trying to play 'Yellow Submarine.' He turned and beamed at her. "Hello, Sarah. I hope I didn't wake you."

"You don't know that I was asleep," she replied.

"That's true."

"And," she added, plucking the instrument from his hands, "even if you did, that didn't stop you practicing."

The Doctor frowned. "Playing, Sarah, playing—I studied under Beethoven."

"Well, that explains why you don't know how to play quietly."

"Nonsense!" boomed the Doctor. "You're just a light sleeper."

"I wasn't asleep." Sarah Jane laughed. "Besides, why did you think I was?"

"It's night."

"How can it be night inside the TARDIS?"

"It's usually day when we materialize, isn't it?"

"Doctor, that's silly."

"That's relativity." He leapt for-

ward and plucked the piccolo back from Sarah Jane and blew a note of no particular regard before turning to run a hand over the controls to his ship.

"So," said Sarah Jane, "time outside the TARDIS is different to time inside?"

"You might say that," said the Doctor, "or you might say that there's no such thing as time at all."

"But there are pasts and futures!"

"Are there?" he mused.

"Alright, if there's no such thing, how do you get the TARDIS to where you want it to?"

"Well, yes." The Doctor paused. "How does one put this? Time's not a place. It's…a feeling."

"So, you fly the TARDIS by…feeling?"

"How do you think birds fly?"

Sarah Jane harrumphed. "You're not a bird."

"No," smiled the Doctor, "and time isn't the sky. Nor snow nor rain nor shine nor gloom…neither here nor there. Some people have gone quite mad trying to get their heads around time."

"I don't want to go mad," said Sarah Jane.

The Doctor grinned. "We're all mad here."

Then the console room turned upside down.

The TARDIS plummeted through the space-time vortex like a stone dropped down a canyon. Within, the console room quaked and Sarah Jane clung to the walls for dear life.

"What's happening?" she cried.

"We've fallen through a hole in time!" exclaimed the Doctor, holding fast at the console, his fingers dancing over the controls.

"I thought you said there was no such thing!" retorted Sarah.

"Don't quibble!" barked the Doctor before the room capsized once more, sending him sprawling. Sarah clambered over to him.

"If we've fallen through—where are we falling?"

The Doctor sat up and fixed her with a sky-blue stare. "Something has been taken out of the vortex. We're being carried along in its wake. Wherever we're going, it can't be pleasant."

"Thank you, Doctor." Sarah Jane frowned. "How noble of you to reassure me at a time like this."

With a fractured, elephantine racket, the turbulence ground to a halt. The Doctor exhaled. "Chin up, Sarah. I think we're through the worst of it."

Sarah Jane harrumphed. "Knowing us, the worst is yet to come."

But the Doctor was already out the doors.

All around was ruination. The TARDIS was surrounded by debris, concrete and steel shattered and strewn as if crushed underfoot. The sky was grey and the ground like dust. A low wind clutched at the Doctor's scarf and Sarah Jane wished she had brought a coat out into all this nothing.

"Is—is this what happens when you're pulled out of the vortex?"

"A plausible theory," said the Doctor. "But this looks more like the result of a missile strike."

"Back to the TARDIS then?" suggested Sarah Jane—this place was giving her the creeps.

"No," said the Doctor. "Onward."

He stalked off toward the dusty horizon.

Sarah Jane frowned, but followed him anyway. Being out here with the Doctor wasn't pleasant, true, but going it alone? No thank you. Not that she needed protecting, mind you, but after travelling for so long with the Doctor she'd found it was helpful if each had the other's back. Who knew what might be lurking in these ruins? Insurgents? Wild animals? Ghosts?

"Stop."

It was the Doctor. He was standing under what had been a bridge, wrecked stone pillars on either side of him, rubble at his feet. He looked almost at home. Suddenly, Sarah Jane noticed the ground was trembling. She could hear the wreckage around them creak and crack, the wind beginning to howl.

The Doctor was by her side in a flash. "Get down," he hissed and soon they were pressed together, the Doctor's scarf thrown over them, the wind whipping overhead and the rumbling of the ground ratcheting up and up into a roar, a guttural cry that Sarah Jane found impossible to place. It was far too loud to be an animal but it didn't sound like a machine. She wanted to look up, to see what was happening around her but the Doctor held her tight, hat jammed down over his curls, eyes shut tight against the howling. Was he protecting her or protecting himself?

And then, the sound ceased. So did the wind and the quaking of the ground.

"Are you all right?"

Sarah Jane looked up. The man couldn't have been much older than she was, and he wore the half-smile of someone who hopes they're not addressing a lunatic. He wore a pastel-coloured overall—as did the people walking by him. People walking by…

She was on her feet before the Doctor but soon enough they were both standing, taking in their surroundings. Buildings soared around them; dusky towers decorated with glittering windows. The street on which they stood bustled with dozens of people. The Doctor boggled.

Sarah Jane realised the young man was still waiting for a reply. "We're fine, thank you…Could you tell us where we are?"

The man laughed. "City centre, of course!"

"I'm afraid we're a little more lost than that," pronounced the Doctor. "Which city is this?"

"Well, officially they're calling it Tenzin but it's the only city we've got. Are you tourists or something?"

"Something like that." Sarah Jane smiled. "When you say it's the only city—"

"Only city on the planet." The man waited for a look of recognition that never came. "You really are out of the loop, aren't you?"

Sarah Jane nodded.

"The colony here's only fifty years old—they haven't had any time to build anywhere else."

"Ah," the Doctor said. "An Earth colony."

"Yes," said the man, slowly. Sarah Jane could tell he wanted to get away.

"It all looks very impressive for something so new," she said.

"Yes," called the Doctor, who was busily examining the buildings on the opposite curb, "cities like these don't just appear overnight."

"Well, that's progress for you, isn't it?" the man said. "The elite say we're building Earth's most livable colony

out here."

"No strife then?" the Doctor asked. "No unrest? No unease?"

"Certainly not!" insisted the man.

"Then what's that noise?" asked Sarah Jane. It had started again, while they were speaking, the low grumble underfoot, the tuneless whistle of the wind.

The man looked around in bewilderment, trying to place the sound somewhere that wasn't everywhere. "I—I don't know."

Sarah Jane turned to the Doctor but he was doubled over, apparently wracked with pain. She ran over to him. "Doctor—what's wrong? What is it?"

"Something—wrong—with—time," hissed the Doctor through gritted teeth.

Everything around trembled, like the whole planet wanted to tear itself apart. Sarah Jane looked back for the man, but he was gone—leaving a silhouette in his wake. She watched in fear and awe as the whole city disappeared in shreds and patches, bodies and buildings skerricked away like film burning up in a projector, wind tearing through it all like so much paper. Then—nothing. But it was not the same nothing as before.

Cracked earth stretched out around her and the Doctor for miles, only ever disrupted by patches of tawny, dry grass. No rubble, no sign of life. All was still. The Doctor gasped.

"Doctor?" asked Sarah Jane.

"Temporal distortion," he growled, getting to his feet.

"We've gone forward in time?"

"Or back," said the Doctor, kicking at a mound of earth. "This all looks decidedly primordial. More to the point, we're not the ones that are moving." He pointed over Sarah Jane's shoulder. She turned and saw the familiar silhouette of the TARDIS on the horizon.

"We're not moving through time," explained the Doctor. "The planet is."

"That's—impossible," breathed Sarah Jane.

"I could feel it Sarah. Feel the wrongness of it, as time was wrenched out of joint. Someone has cut this planet out of the vortex, sealed it off and is moving it through its own past and future."

"Who?" asked Sarah Jane. "Why?"

The Doctor looked up, searching for an explanation, but the earth began to quake once more. The Doctor collapsed with a cry. Sarah Jane ran to him and, taking him under his arms, lifted him to his feet.

"Back to the TARDIS!" she called out over the sudden din. They staggered in the direction of the little blue box, while all around the landscape strobed and shifted. They were halfway there before everything slowed again and a tank roared in front of them. Sarah Jane ground to a halt and the Doctor, delirious, clung to her. The tank—grey like the ruined city that surrounded them—went on past them, grinding up dust. To Sarah Jane's horror, soldiers followed in its wake.

""Halt!" cried one of them—it was impossible to tell which under the heavy goggles that obscured their faces. "Identify yourself!"

"We're civilians!" called out Sarah Jane. "We're trying to get away from here."

"You're not dressed like civilians—what's your district?"

Sarah Jane swore under her breath. She was tired of the way her clothes almost kept getting her killed time after—time! Oh but this was easy—she just had to keep them talking before—

A bullet impacted the ground beside her and she squealed.

"What is your district?" the soldier yelled.

"This is my district!" she yelled back. "So just—leave us alone!"

"This district is under military jurisdiction."

Of course it is, she thought.

"You're under arrest."

The Doctor cried out, suddenly alert. "Officer, I've never seen that bear before in my life!"

"You what?" said the soldier.

"You heard!" thundered the Doctor. He took hold of Sarah Jane's hand and together they ran at full pelt toward the military. Sarah Jane screamed as she saw them level their guns straight at her and the Doctor was pulling her closer and this was it, they—

They ran through the soldiers as if they were ghosts. Another moment and they had reached the TARDIS and the warzone around them evaporated.

Inside the TARDIS, Sarah Jane breathed. It always seemed—not peaceful, but secure, as if breathing in the air of the control room was itself an inoculation against the darkness that might wait without. The Doctor was staring at the scanner. He looked different—haggard and tense. The time distortion had really knocked him for six.

"What do we do?" ventured Sarah Jane.

"We could try and get away," said the Doctor.

"We never try that."

The Doctor smiled wanly. "You're right, of course. We need to find who's doing this. The resources required to pull a whole world out of time—not even the Time Lords would countenance something so reckless."

"It's not a natural phenomenon?"

"Any ecosystem we could conceive of would collapse on a planet with no fixed time stream, Sarah. Life could scarcely begin, let alone a colony. No, no, no," muttered the Doctor. "This is outside interference. And unless we do something about it, it will tear that planet apart."

"So," said Sarah Jane, "we call the Time Lords?"

"Certainly not!" snapped the Doctor. "They'd probably blast the place out of history altogether—and us with it! It's up to us, I'm afraid."

"As usual."

"Well then," chided the Doctor, "what did you notice while we were out there?"

"In case it escaped your attention, I was trying very hard to make sure the both of us weren't killed!"

"Oh, it hadn't, Miss Smith, and you mustn't imagine I'm not grateful, but *think*! What was the most surprising thing out there?"

"Doctor—if these people's lives are at stake, I'm not in the mood for guessing games. Everything I saw surprised me!"

"But that's it exactly! You saw everything—we went through a half dozen time zones and every one was clear as day. It was never night out there."

He's right, thought Sarah Jane, but she was frustrating herself trying to figure out what he meant. "Surely

that's not too incredible, Doctor—maybe the days are longer out there."

"For a planet to have day and night it would need to be in orbit around a star—and I don't think our stolen world is, Sarah. The Time Lords wouldn't countenance the theft of a planet, but only they, and they alone, could manage the theft of a star from time itself."

"If there's no star out there—"

"But there is. Look at the scanner."

Sarah Jane turned and looked at an image of the city Tenzin, apparently halfway through being built. What looked like a small, yellow sun lit up the scene from its cradle in the sky, making the architecture gleam. You could have put it on a postcard. Soon enough though, the time distortion hit and the city warped forward—it was similar to when they'd seen it before but now everything looked worn out, exhausted and embittered. From the scanner, Sarah Jane could see demonstrators—pastel overalls decorated with crude insignia—clashing with the military. In the sky was the same light as before, casting its glow onto all and sundry.

"Alright, if nobody can pull a star out of time," began Sarah Jane, "then—"

"Then that is not a star," concluded the Doctor.

"Oh, what is it then?" Sarah Jane exclaimed—the Doctor's scientific curiosity was all well and good but she was getting tired of guessing games like these.

"It's some kind of time ship," announced the Doctor. "It pulled the whole planet out of the vortex and sealed it off in a bubble of its own history."

"And it's moving the planet back and forth through that history?"

"That I don't know—but I do know it can't sustain this arrangement. The vortex isn't inclined to compensate for having a whole world removed from it—it'll be trying to pull the planet back and that means one thing."

"We have to tread carefully?"

"Precisely," said the Doctor. He moved to the console and began adjusting the controls before fixing Sarah Jane with the same cold stare as before. "I suggest you hold on."

The interior of the ship was dark, and vast. Sarah Jane felt a little as if she were walking through the inside of something's eye; the floor was like hard rubber and dissipated up the curved walls in gummy black tendrils. Here and there, luminescence flickered.

"Homely, isn't it?"

She turned to find the Doctor beside her, a Bakelite torch in hand.

"I suppose so," said Sarah Jane. "If you like not being able to see more than two feet in front of you."

"Yes." The Doctor grinned. "I've often thought I could make quite a good living designing better-lit lairs for aspiring conquerors."

"I suppose you knew Mussolini?"

"No—but I was a personal friend of Sir Christopher Wren."

Sarah Jane giggled but the Doctor hushed her. She was about to ask why when she heard it. Music. It was muffled, but definitely playing up ahead of them. It sound almost like a waltz.

The Doctor gave her that look—the one that the journalist in her could never refuse—the wide-open stare that said 'shall we go and look?'

Moving toward the sound, they found a door—a proper, paneled oak affair, completely at odds with the rest of the ship.

"Well," said Sarah Jane, "go on. Open it."

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. "There could be anything on the other side of that door. You open it."

Sarah Jane sighed. "Alright, fine," she said, and pulled it open.

The room on the other side was bright and spacious—*if the corridor without was autumn*, thought Sarah Jane, *this is spring*. A spartan chandelier lit up the tiled floor and the few pieces of furniture—a chaise lounge in one corner and a television in the other. Between the two was a young woman, wearing a dusky blue overall. Her eyes were closed and she was dancing. Sarah Jane couldn't tell where the music was coming from—it seemed to be playing from out of the walls.

The Doctor didn't hesitate. "Good afternoon!" he called out. "Are you from Tenzin?"

The woman's eyes flicked open with a start and she stopped, clinging to herself as if she had been caught in the nude.

The Doctor went on. "It's just the clothes you're wearing look very familiar, don't you think so, Sarah?"

"Oh, very familiar, Doctor. Hello," she called to the woman, in what she hoped was her most disarming manner. "I'm Sarah Jane Smith and this is the Doctor. We're here to help."

The woman relaxed slightly and stepped toward them. "Did the Ophanin send you?"

"They're in charge, aren't they?" said Sarah Jane, before the Doctor could put his foot in it.

"I'd never thought of it like that," said the woman. Then she held out her hand. "I'm Naia."

Sarah Jane shook hands. "Pleased to meet you. How long have you been here?"

"Not long enough," answered Naia. "The Ophanin tell me we're still not ready for the final phase. Are you observers?"

"Something like that." The Doctor frowned. He was examining the walls, blue eyes reflecting the pinprick glitter of the chandelier. "I'm afraid very little has been explained to us, though. You're from Tenzin, yes? The human colony?"

"I wouldn't call it that." Naia shrugged. "But yes."

"Why not?" ventured Sarah Jane.

"Tenzin was a name chosen by Earth's elite, so we didn't use it."

"We?"

"Those of us that fought for independence—why haven't the Ophanin told you this?"

"Because we did not invite them here," came a terrible voice from the entrance to the room. Sarah Jane turned to look—a figure stood there, clad in white—shirt, frock coat and trousers, all the colour of bone. A cream-coloured cravat was worn under its collar but—Sarah Jane recoiled—the figure had no face. Fire flared where its head would have been, a thicket of blazing flames that gave only the barest suggestion of belonging to the body at all. It was like some ghastly collage and Sarah Jane felt she might have dismissed it as such then and there if it hadn't spoken again, in its voice like claws through kindling.

"You are intruders," it said.

"We are," replied the Doctor.

"You are interfering."

The Doctor beamed. "One does what one can. You are the Ophanin, I presume."

"We are. And you are our prisoners." It stretched out a white-gloved hand and everything went dark.

Sarah Jane woke with a start to find herself outstretched on the tiled floor she'd been standing on when the…Ophanin? Yes, that was it—when the Ophanin had, she presumed, attacked. Music lilted all around and, a few feet away, Naia was dancing.

"Where's the Doctor?" asked Sarah Jane.

Naia wafted an arm over in the direction of the television. "The Ophanin took him. They seemed happy enough to leave you here. Would you like to dance?"

"I'm quite all right, thank you," said Sarah Jane, standing up and straightening her clothes.

"There was never any time for dancing back home," sighed Naia.

"When you said they took the Doctor, why did you point to the television?"

"You can watch the interrogation if you like."

Sarah Jane hurried over to the screen, before realizing that this was all it was—a screen. "How do I turn it on?" she called back to Naia.

"Touch—and feel what you want to see."

So Sarah Jane touched and an image flickered into life.

The Doctor, manacled to the wall by the tendrils that grew out of it. All around were the Ophanin, with faces of fire and clothes stolen from some nineteenth century novel. Embers drifted down cravats and caught on the bottom of bustle gowns.

Sarah Jane shuddered—it was like the cast of a BBC costume drama had all been caught in the act of spontaneously combusting.

"Who are they—the Ophanin?" she asked Naia.

Naia stopped dancing. "All I know is that they saved my life. That's enough for me."

"You mean they took you out of time?"

"Not like that. They came for me at a time when I'd given up all hope. They offered me a second chance."

A crackle came from the television.

"I hope you realise you're destroying that planet," said the Doctor.

The Ophanin dressed all in white stepped toward him. "You cannot know that for certain."

"But I do—what you're doing is tampering with forces you don't understand."

"We understand absolutely," came the rasping reply. "The Ophanin are the masters of time."

"Oh really?" asked the Doctor slyly. "Well, I'm a lord of time—and I've never heard of you."

One of the other Ophanin turned to face the Doctor—this one wore a voluminous evening dress that rippled as it spoke. "We know what you are, interloper. That is why, after this interrogation, we will destroy you."

The Doctor's face fell. "Oh."

Sarah Jane frowned. "I have to get down there."

"I can't let you do that," said Naia. She was dancing again, moving wistfully in long measured strides around what Sarah Jane now realised was a

kind of ballroom.

"Listen, do you know what they're doing to your planet? It's chaos down there!"

"Of course I know—I'm making it happen."

Sarah Jane felt a chill take root in her. "What?"

Naia slowed her progress around the ballroom and allowed her arms to take up the music. "This is my time machine," she announced with a grand gesture.

"The technology you're using is hugely unstable," came the Doctor's voice from the television screen.

"That is why we are experimenting," responded one of the Ophanin glibly.

"You're transgressing all the laws of time!"

"Do not dare talk to us of transgressions!" snarled the Ophanin in white.

"So it's your time machine," said Sarah Jane, "but the Ophanin built it?"

Naia smiled. "The ship isn't the time machine—it's only able to take things out of time."

"So what's causing the—" Sarah Jane stopped. If Naia was causing the distortion, she would have to be careful. "How are you doing what you're doing, then?"

Naia twirled over to the other side of the room. "I'm dancing."

"Pardon?"

With a brush of her hand, Naia made the images of the Doctor's interrogation vanish from the screen—they were replaced by the picture of a young girl. She couldn't have been more than ten years old.

"It's like I told you," said Naia, "feel what you want to see. Or when you want to be. The dance is a means of focusing." She stopped suddenly, in the middle of the space, and stared at the picture on the television. "She always loved music." Then, with a flick of her hair, she was dancing again.

"You knew her then?" asked Sarah Jane.

Naia's reply was soft—as if wary of disturbing a deep sleep. "She's my sister."

"But if she's down on that planet then you're—"

"She's not," snapped Naia. "She's gone. For now."

Again, Sarah Jane breathed. "You're trying to bring her back."

Naia drifted past, feet crossing over each other in time to the lullaby that hummed in the air. "I can see why the Ophanin weren't bothered by you—you're slow on the uptake."

"Now, look—I know you're…grieving. But have you stopped to consider what you're doing to everyone else down there? The Doctor says—"

"Why should I trust anything he says?" asked Naia.

"Because he's a Time Lord—he knows how these things work!"

A laugh from Naia and another twirl. "And why should I believe you?"

"Because I'm trying to save your life!"

"The Ophanin already did that—they gave me the chance to bring Elen back."

"Your sister? Naia, I—would you stop dancing?"

"No!" shouted Naia. "I won't stop. I won't let you interfere."

"I don't want to interfere, I just—"

I'm not going to let it be my fault all over again!" Naia stared at her with

cold fury.

Sarah Jane approached her gingerly. "Naia, it wasn't your fault."

"But it was. Completely."

"I don't believe that," said Sarah Jane.

"Oh, you don't? Let me spell it out for you then, Sarah. Our parents died in the first year of protests. Murdered by their own government. Elen was my responsibility after that, but I was too interested in my own independence." She turned away. "It wasn't even the cause that drew me in—it was the excitement of it, the danger. The opportunity for revenge."

Sarah Jane realized how small Naia looked now she had stopped dancing—it was strange how quickly fear could become pity. "What happened?" she asked.

"Nothing, really," answered Naia. That's the terrible thing—I was meant to be watching her but I'd gone off. Not even to a rally or a raid, just a party. Another stupid party to celebrate how dangerous we were. I went out and while I was out, Elen wandered onto the road. A transport hit her and she died."

Silence, save for the music that still echoed gently across the room. Then, almost imperceptibly, Naia began to cry. Sarah Jane refused to let her horror hold her back—she went over and took her by the arm. "I'm sorry."

Naia shrank back. "You just want to make me stop."

"Naia, I know what you're feeling. I—my parents died before I even had a chance to really remember them. And you don't know how many times I've thought about asking the Doctor to take me back, to meet them, to see—"

"To see if you could stop it happening?"

Sarah Jane swallowed. "Yes."

Something gleamed in Naia's eyes. "Why not do it then?"

"Because I know he'd refuse."

"What? Because you just do as he says? Because he's a 'Time Lord'? Because he knows what's best for you?"

"Because he knows that's not how time works!" stormed Sarah Jane.

Naia was quiet, taken aback by the sudden outburst.

"And I know it too," Sarah Jane went on. "Because before I met the Doctor, there was no way of going back. I had to accept that my Mum and Dad were gone. And rather than clinging to something that wasn't there, I knew I had to go forward and foster something new."

Naia had turned back to face Elen's image on the television. "She was so young."

"And she'll stay that way—honour her memory. Don't throw it away by destroying the only world she ever knew."

"I don't want to destroy it, I—"

"I know," said Sarah Jane, "but that's what this machine is doing. I've seen it—every time you move Tenzin to a different moment, the whole world feels like it's about to crack open. Ask the Ophanin if you don't believe me."

Naia was still for a moment then, mind apparently made up, crossed to the television. She pressed a hand to the screen and the image of her sister was replaced by the view of the Ophanin control room. Sarah Jane's gut tightened—*the Doctor hung from the wall, unconscious. The Ophanin gathered round him, heads held high, flickering like hellfire.*

"Ophanin!" called Naia.

One by one, the figures on the screen turned. The one dressed in white moved closer. *"You have stopped dancing,"* it announced.

"Show me Tenzin," said Naia.

"Why have you stopped dancing?"

"I want to make sure the experiment is safe."

"You have our assurance that it is."

"Then why have you strung the Doctor up?" interrupted Sarah Jane.

Another of the Ophanin called out. *"The Time Lord is an enemy of the Ophanin. He must be destroyed."*

"Why an enemy?" pressed Sarah Jane. "If you're doing this to help Naia, why not just explain that to him?"

"He only threatens the experiment."

"Yes, you keep calling it that. It doesn't sound very compassionate to me. What do you think, Naia?"

Naia looked more uncertain than ever. It was like she was waking up from a dream. "Show me Tenzin," she said again.

The Ophanin in white hesitated a moment before responding with a curt bow. *"As you wish."*

The screen flashed and went dark. Then a new image faded into view. Chaos.

Buildings fluttered; they collapsed, flew back into place and collapsed again. Silhouettes of people flashed in and out of sight like lightning, eyes panicked and mouths open in silent cries. The ground cracked and dark clouds raced overhead. The ghosts of tanks and soldiers stretched and skidded through melting streets. Naia watched in terror as the only place she had ever called home collapsed under the weight of its own history.

"Do you understand now?" asked Sarah Jane.

Naia nodded, tears in her eyes. "Ophanin!" she called again. The screen flicked back to the control room, burning countenances glaring out at her and Sarah Jane. "Stop the experiment."

The Ophanin in white stiffened. "You do not want us to bring your sister back?" it hissed.

"I thought I was the one doing that," said Naia flatly.

The Ophanin was silent, before turning to one of its fellows. *"What is the status of excess telepathic energy?"*

"Not enough to resolve the experiment," it replied.

The Ophanin turned back to Naia. *"Your world is held in a delicate balance."*

"Don't lie to me!" yelled Naia. "My world is being torn apart!"

"We must continue with the experiment."

"No," said Naia. "I won't have any more deaths on my conscience."

"Then we will force you to continue," said the Ophanin. And the screen went dark. The music stopped. Then, a terrible, electronic whine filled the room. Sarah Jane clapped her hands to her ears and Naia sank to the floor with a desperate cry.

"Naia!" shouted Sarah Jane. "There's still time to fix this!"

"It's—inside—my head!" Naia gasped. She huddled further into herself, every part of her body taut with agony.

Grimacing, Sarah Jane tore her

hands from her ears and forced herself to lift Naia up. "Look at me! Naia, look at me!"

Naia's eyes flashed open, terrified and pricked with tears.

"This—this ship isn't the time machine, remember? You are."

Naia nodded.

"So think," urged Sarah Jane. "Feel!"

"I—I can't," wailed Naia under the cacophony that flooded the air.

"You can! Think of Elen—not what she could have been but what she would have wanted. Think of going forward."

"I—"

"Think of independence—from Earth, from grief, from the Ophanin—think of being free!"

Naia shut her eyes again, tight, and concentrated. Sarah Jane could feel something move between them, like electricity. The surrounding din suddenly wavered.

"That's it!" cried Sarah Jane "You've got it!"

The walls splintered. Snatches of music broke through the pervading noise. Images flicked over the television—of Elen, of Tenzin, of people and laughter and tears and—and then the screen shattered.

In the control room of the Ophanin's vortex ship, alarm bells were tolling. Black, organic displays gurgled and flashed warning lights in the glowering faces of their masters.

"Psychochronic matrix not responding," hissed one of the pilots.

"Telepathic feedback at danger point," warned another.

Their leader's features blazed. "Funnel all reserve power to maintaining meta-temporal stability," it commanded, even as the deck shuddered underfoot.

"Spatio-temporal resolution has already begun," came the response.

"What's the matter?" called a voice from the door. It was the Doctor's companion, with Naia close behind. "Up the creek without a fire extinguisher?"

The Ophanin leader turned to face Sarah Jane and Naia. The control room was suffused with panic, fire-faced specters working desperately to compensate for the sensation of collapse that had the walls trembling.

"You have betrayed the Ophanin," it snarled.

"Not before they betrayed me," said Naia. "Now let the Doctor go."

"No. He will die on your account. Just like your sister."

"It doesn't work like that," spoke Sarah Jane, moving to Naia's side. "Our lives intersect but we all have our own choices to make. Everything has its time—and nothing has the right to control that."

"Not even the Time Lords?" the Ophanin spat.

Sarah Jane looked over to the Doctor. "Not even them."

Without warning, a section of wall gave way. Tendrils writhed and noxious fog billowed out, muddying everything in sight.

Sarah Jane saw her chance. "Come on!" she called to Naia and the two women ran to the Doctor and pulled him free of his bonds. He spluttered and looking up to see his rescuers, smiled weakly.

"Hello Sarah Jane—have I slept long?"

"Not so that we couldn't manage," grinned Sarah Jane. "Let's get out of here!"

She turned to find the three of them were surrounded by Ophanin—burning hands outstretched. For a moment, her courage deserted her and she felt the old fear, that clutching at the heart that always came when, even with the Doctor by her side, she looked upon death. But then Naia cried out "Stop!" and Sarah Jane turned to see the woman was holding a glittering shard of technology high above her head. Blood gleamed wetly as it trickled off the object and down her arm. The Ophanin actually stepped back and Naia smiled grimly.

"That's right—wouldn't want me to break this, would you?"

"What is it?" asked Sarah Jane through gritted teeth.

"They grafted it to me when I agreed to what they wanted," Naia answered. "It connects me to their machinery, but it does more than that, doesn't it?" She gestured to the cavernous control room, as it trembled under the weight of an impending collapse. "It's the last thing holding all this together."

"You would not dare," sneered the Ophanin leader.

"Wouldn't I?" said Naia. She dropped the shard and crushed it under her foot. The Ophanin howled and so did their ship, instrumentation bursting into crimson fire and mottled walls disintegrating. Naia, Sarah Jane and the Doctor fled through the sound and fury, leaving the Ophanin lost in the smoke and ruin of their own machinations.

The dawn made Tenzin sparkle.

"It looks different than when I left it," said Naia. Sarah Jane put a hand on her shoulder.

"I suspect you may have shuttled it out of conflict altogether," the Doctor remarked. "Maybe it's always been independent."

Naia allowed herself a gentle smile. "Thank you."

"Ah, thank you, Naia," grinned the Doctor. And then he turned and unlocked the doors to the blue box that stood sentinel behind them. "Come along, Sarah—people to see and all the rest of it."

"Wait, what about the Ophanin?" Naia asked.

"Their ship was the anchor holding this planet outside of the vortex—your outburst interrupted their temporal grasp and the vortex pulled it back. Nature abhors a vacuum."

Sarah Jane looked up into the pale blue sky. "So what happened to them?"

"Shut out of the vortex," explained the Doctor. "Cast adrift." A shadow flicked across his gaze. "It's no more than they deserve." Then the old smile returned. He tipped his hat to Naia and disappeared through the TARDIS doors—a little like a butterfly, a little like a bat.

Sarah Jane turned to Naia. "What will you do?"

Naia smiled. "Foster something new." She leaned forward and kissed Sarah Jane gently on the cheek. "Thank you."

Sarah Jane smiled. "Time is what you make of it."

"Did the Doctor teach you that?"

"No, I taught myself."

Naia laughed. "I think you will make something remarkable, Sarah

Jane Smith."

"I think you'll do the same." The two women held hands for the briefest moment before Sarah Jane turned and followed the Doctor into the TARDIS.

Naia stood and watched as the machine vanished with a sound like memory, then she turned and walked toward the future.

The Name of Universes

James Bojaciuk

Few things resist the greatest power of the Time Lords: record keeping.

Paradoxes, ontological and grandfather, are recorded and passed on to the relevant authorities; elder lords, worshipped as gods across the firmament, their power and presence reducing other beings to gnats, find their genealogies recorded and rites preserved in disinterested academese; events are consistently compared against the true history of the cosmos.

But there is one thing outside the Time Lords' records.

Conveniently, it's also outside our universe.

The situation outside offered little to keep record of. Neither light, nor dark. Neither close, nor far. Neither before, nor after. Instead it was a distanceless, grey twilight-in-waiting. Movement was a dream cast inside the spheres. Time was perhaps less objective than it sometimes seems. The great outside was a single point.

And yet, as metaphor would have it, in this grey, something swam.

But as Secondary Chief Hauora Bydanacnestistaxota noted, *metaphor is a poor substitute for straightforward reality*.

Let us say, then, in strictest accuracy, "a *form* caused-and-effected to a new orientation as situated in the spaceless grey that was a single, eternal point."

There was a universe at this specific point, situated in this specific orientation. Now there was not. What ships flared out from it—great generational ships made to colonize other continuums—were quickly caught. As the *form* took a new orientation, it devoured the trails they had left "across" the grey.

The universe was not the only thing adrift. The *form* did not take notice of its repast. Nor could it have noticed, even if it wished to—and this is not a metaphor—a buoy that drifted "nearby." A red buoy, bearing a proud regalia: layered rings lemniscating togeth-

er.

Even though the *form* could not have not noticed the buoy, it soon followed the universe inside. But as it followed, the buoy sent a final signal home.

Something's here.

A light flashed on the TARDIS console. That was nothing new. She had seen this one flash before. But never in that color. Whatever it was, it hurt to look at.

"How would you like to save the universes, Sarah Jane Smith?"

"The universe, surely, Doctor. You have too many sibilants."

"Universes-*s*-s. I never misspeak. It makes one feel so inferior. It just wouldn't be right." He stopped, looking at her with his most serious eyes. "That's what other people do."

He pressed a button. When that failed to have his desired effect—or any effect—he took her hand, extended her index finger, and pressed it to the button. "Don't move."

"But Doctor. The Universes**s**?"

"Ah. Are you current on your space-time theory?"

She shook her head.

"Are you out-of-date on your space-ti—"

She glared.

"Then let's give you your first Time Lord Academy lesson. Impress your friends. Imagine I gave you a cup of water." Out from his scarf, he handed her a cup of water with an infuriating magician's grace. "You accept your cup is full of water and there's not-water outside of it, yes?"

"Air."

"Not-Water." He leaned down over her to meet her eyes. "There's not-water outside your cup."

"Have it your way. Not-Water. There's not-water outside my cup."

He nodded deliriously. "Then it would stand to reason that the universe is a cup filled with space and time. What would be outside of our cup?"

"Not-Water!"

It was his turn to glare.

She grinned. "Not-Space and Not-Time, then. So there's no space and time…?"

"There is and there isn't. There's no distance, but there is…placements. There's no time, but there's something akin to cause and effect. Not-Space and Not-Time are technical terms for that."

"Are they?"

He carried on, head held high. "There are beings in Not-Space and Not-Time. Fish, if you like. Sharks, if you like. I don't. Let's call them coelacanth. And they gobble up universes. No-one's ever seen one—isn't that mad?"

Sarah Jane's eyes went wide, and her back straight.

"Rarely! Rarely. One is coming."

She made an uncomfortable sound, eyes wider.

"But not for your universe. Just other people's. It's the old saying. Bad things only happen to other people. It's like me and inferiority."

"And those are the universes we're saving?"

"Yes. Moving them from before the coelacanth's snout."

"When there's no distance, Doctor. Not-Space, remember."

He waved that concern away. "But there are still our friends Mr. Cause and Mz. Effect. As well as our mutual friend Miss TARDIS. What is the one

thing we have more than enough of? *Time* and Relative Dimensions in *Space*. A timeship brimming over with it! Keep your finger there. We're almost out of our universe now. *Keep* it there. Just another minute."

"The TARDIS can leave the universe?"

He gave her that infectious grin. "Not officially."

She thought this over. "What is the word for universes?"

"The word?"

"Oh, you know. A swarm of bees, a litter of kittens, a lovely of ladybirds. What's the word for a great big bunch of universes?"

"A vagabond. A Vagabond of Universes."

"I don't believe you." She delivered it in a pout, despite the light of laughter creeping in at the edges of her eyes.

"A Gadabout."

"I still don't." She shook her head to stop from smiling.

"Would you believe in *a Gazingstock of Universes*?"

"That one isn't even a word!" She laughed. In spite of the Doctor, in spite of herself, in spite of the situation. "I could do better."

His eyes fixed on her. *Try me.*

"A Traipse of Universes!"

Laughing, he took her finger off that button, and onto a button that burned brighter the longer she held it. At first, only a pink.

"So you're going to…? What, pour out our Space and Time into the Not-Space and Not-Time." She smiled despite how she felt. "To use the technical terms."

The button burnt to orange.

"Oh, more than that, Sarah. We're going to turn the TARDIS inside out to do it. Pump our all space out there for the universes to move in, and all our time so they have the time to get out of the way. Your everyday Newtonian physics will do the rest. We don't even need to call up Einstein. Let alone, call up King."

The button blazed red, and Sarah Jane had the uncomfortable memory of Big Red Buttons from old cartoons.

"How do we do that?"

"Well, you just did. That's the self-destruct, Sarah! Time—to say nothing of the Not-Time—is of the essence. I have another job for you. You need to stop what we just did. I'll have my hands full here. You'll need to go to the secondary control in the engine room."

She stared at him blankly.

"It isn't safe for you to stay here. All our own time will go rushing out through here. A few hundred years, give or take, will go by."

"But won't you…wouldn't you turn back into—"

"Into old velvet and lace? Ha! No! I'm not losing my age in a sense like that, only duration. And I could stand to lose a few hundred years. We have a moment before it starts to flood out. I need to open the doors. But first—hold out your hand."

With that same infuriating grace he produced a watch that could've come from Mr. Spock's wrist, and wrapped it around her own.

"A scanner watch. It's my own invention."

"'…said the White Knight to Alice.'"

"Now you'll hear me all the way! Follow the dot. That'll take you straight to the engine room."

She winced, suddenly hearing him

in stereo.

"Hurry, Sarah."

And she did hurry, the uncanny reverberation dying down as she went out the door and into the stark white warren they called a hallway.

The TARDIS hallways were easy to get used to. Comfortably solid no matter if you got turned around the wrong way (which was inevitable, due either to the ship or the ship's captain). Their uniformity almost convinced you there wasn't a void outside, or that falling into said void might have some particularly dire consequences. She could walk down the hallways for days, she told herself, never suspecting that that they were anywhere but a nice, solid building on earth.

As she jogged, checking her scanner watch all the while…something moved. She slowed, raking her vision side to side, then hurried on again.

It was like running down the inside of a snake, surrounded by its undulating skin. She felt every twist. But even a snake has a spine—that last constant point to keep yourself fixated upon, and the snake confined to sensible motion.

The hallway had no such spine.

With a sudden jolt, she realized the hallway was surging out around her, moving in the opposite direction. And she moved from a jog to a run.

The watch spoke. "Sarah, I think it would be a Roam of Universes."

Her breathing steadied. "Surely, Doctor, a Meander of Universes."

"No, no, a Gallivant of Universes."

She felt her hair begin to fall upward as she ran. "A…Stroll of Universes."

The scanner's bead darted to the left, and she followed it to a door. She was used to the TARDIS doors carrying some little trace of home, or at least some recognizable trace of earth's own science fiction. This door, however, resisted her experience. Circular, graven, an uncomfortable color she could only identify as somewhere between purple and green. When she touched it, she couldn't say it opened, only that it allowed her entry.

"Don't your people have a term for this?"

"They do, but if you pinned it down like a particularly ugly example of a beetle, it would run longer than my arm. It would run longer than both my arms. If we held both our hands in a circle, it would still run longer."

Sarah Jane found herself confronted by colors. Swarming, wild colors that chased across her vision. Something that was almost chartreuse cascaded into smoke circles.

As she progressed into the space, its walls dominated by colors that did the only surprising thing left—remain in place—she laughed suddenly. It was only an artist's workshop.

When she found herself forced to describe it later, Sarah Jane faltered. *"We have paint and canvas. Or even, Clyde, the mouse and the color selection in your computer program. It was like…it was like only having the color and the art. The color was the medium, and it became the art. It was beyond me. I'm lucky I worked that much out."*

Despite the cinerous flames of burnt brandy, she followed the scanner watch.

Incardine constellations were paired with an outer space painted in terms of sapphire, and she felt finding space dead and black might be wrong.

"A Promenade of Universes, Doctor. I imagine it's graceful."

"Perhaps. Some of them are rather awkward. A Gawk of Universes."

The scanner watch's dot began to slur across the interface. Merciless and wild, stuttering and blinking. She stopped in the middle of the workshop, waiting for the engine room to settle enough for her to reach it.

"A Migratory of Universes, then."

"Oh, I would say a Runagate of Universes."

The dot slowed, then stopped. The engine room was fifty feet ahead of her. She took one step. Easy.

Well, easy until the floor exploded out from under her in a grace of self-luminous reds.

The floor was shattered in a great gush of metal, and she clung to one brittle edge.

Don't look down.

She began to pull herself up, kicking her foot into the metal and hauling upward.

She felt the change before it hit. The top of the workshop flared away, as the room was pulled away layer by layer. The gravity went with it, and she felt her top half and her bottom half falling in different directions. She grabbed the metal tighter.

A landscape ranged below her. She kicked her feet against the "sky," trying not to imagine how many tens of thousands of feet fell between her and the ground. It was, in fact, a landscape. Open planes giving way to oceans. Trees, bedecked with strange, glowing fruit.

A cityscape ranged above her, captured in a bubble. Serene and unaffected.

His voice crackled over her watch. "A Digression of Universes."

The scanner watch's dot began to move again. It was the only warning she had. The workshop began to rotate, picking up speed as it went. She remembered the piece she had written on astronaut training—and the huge centrifuge machines that pushed the body to its limits. She pressed herself into the metal.

When she looked up (or down; she'd lost all trace of direction), she realized she wasn't in a centrifugal machine at all.

She was in a thaumatrope.

Take two lengths of string and a circular piece of paper. Draw a bird on one side, and a cage on the other. Spin it. You'll see a bird in a cage.

She couldn't bear to imagine what illusion she passed for.

The scanner watch's beeping grew almighty. The room was only twenty feet away "below" her. When she looked "down," she saw it. The engine room was held below her on filaments and a prayer, groaning.

"Oh. You're trying to help me."

The landscape was still "below" her. She tried not to think about it as she braced against the hole, and flung herself down.

Worry in his voice, presumably from her lack of response, he suggested, "A Maunder of Universes."

She twisted in mid-air, stretching out to grab the door jamb.

She fell five feet.

Ten feet—and she closed the gap.

Fifteen feet—and she was just close enough.

Twenty feet—and her hand grazed the jamb, and caught on the bottom of the entryway. It wasn't enough. Her fingernails skidded along the floor.

She dangled for an instant, then fell free.

The scanner watch's beep slowed down.

She fell like the embers of a burning Summer. But only for a moment.

Urgent beeping. She looked at her wrist, spinning in the air as she did. *The room is closer now?*

And then she saw it, in a rush of uncertain images, the room swinging up to catch her. She slid through the door, and fell to the ground as recognizable gravity reasserted itself. She tried to pull herself up, despite it all.

"Thank you." Then, to the Doctor, she suggested, "…a Jaunt of Universes."

She heard the relief when he said, "A Divagate of Universes."

She wavered on her feet. For all the watch's beeping, she saw it. A singular button standing out on a panel.

"You're guiding me…"

She rushed over to the panel, keeping herself upright by leaning into it, and pressed it. She heard grinding from everywhere around her room. And that was it. The watch fell silent. She looked back to the door she fell through. And stepped toward it.

Reaching out to open the door, she stopped herself. What if gravity was a lie, and she tumbled out to her death? Or if this *was* the last room of the TARDIS left? Or if…?

She opened the door.

And beyond it, she found the Doctor, and the console room. He stood at the TARDIS' main doors, shoulders sagged. *Quiet* is not a word she would have used to describe the Doctor before now.

"Come here, Sarah."

Her fear melted, and she stepped to him with an ease she couldn't quite believe. As she passed the console, she patted it in thanks.

"Did it…did we…?"

"We did, in fact, pull them right from out of the coelacanth's snout!"

"What…what happened, Doctor? What is it like out there?"

"Ah. Are you current on your medieval cosmology?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"The Earth stood at the center, or lowest point, of a universe alive with music and light. Not that they believed the Earth was flat—that is a base slander against their science, which really was a good deal better than that—but that Earth stood as a motionless, silent world. And as the living spheres—the planets inhabited by their intelligences—roved, they created the musica universalis. Or perhaps not quite music, but certainly something *like* music."

"That's all wrong!"

"Perhaps they weren't wrong, Sarah. Perhaps they only put it in words too small to be believed."

He opened the door, and patted the old girl's doorframe. The closest universes were slow; as she gazed further out, into a universe of universes, they gained in dignity, power, and speed.

The only way Sarah Jane could describe it, many years later, when she tried to tell it as a bedtime story, was that it was like being alone on a street on Christmas Day. You look into every home in the row, seeing…not merely the fairy lights and packages and trees, but the joy they stood for. On earth, she looked out into the universe. Now, she looked in.

And the joy she saw was a song.

Then, low at first, as though the TARDIS had only just decided to let it in, the music. It wasn't the music of the spheres. It was the symphony spurred by the spheres in concert. "There," a low rumble brass. "Here," high-strung harmony. A carillon carried through the worlds.

She clung to the Doctor's arm, only belatedly realizing she shook. She felt a tremble, somewhere below the scarf and velvet, and felt better. She pressed her face into his arm.

When he spoke, his voice was heavy.

"There is heard a hymn when the panes are dim, and never before or again. When the nights are strong with a darkness long, and the dark is alive with rain. Never we know but in sleet and in snow, the place where the great fires are."

It was impossible to say what broke first, his boggling giant of a smile or the mood.

The Doctor reached out and touched her nose, pausing before offering a last word. "A Mystery of Universes."

"No, I believe it's a Miracle of Universes."



4. INVESTIGATION

Sarah Jane in an Exciting Adventure with the Fauxes

Anna Maloney

"Ms. Smith, I sent you up there because something unusual is happening. You know it. We're all aware that musicians are being killed, *I* want to know what's causing it."

Sarah Jane let out a deep sigh her editor did not appreciate, her free hand fingering through tabloids claiming aliens were at work, before settling a newspaper on top of the pile on her desk.

"I *know,* Mr. Jones, but I really think that's all that's going on. They're being targeted by someone with a grudge! This is a matter for the police. I don't see what else you think I'm going to find here."

"Then find out what the grudge is. Whoever is killing them is targeting big names. Drum up some interesting facts so that you can predict who's next, cause a stir. I'd like to be selling these papers, Smith! I know you can do it. There must be some motivation here. Aren't you the least bit curious as to *why* they're going after musicians?"

Sarah Jane thought about it. She'd dismissed it at first because she was more interested in finishing her book and in any actual alien happenings in areas nearby, but now that her editor insisted she actually consider it…well, she supposed it *was* rather curious.

"All right, all right. You've got me. I'll look into it."

Once her editor was off the phone Sarah began massaging her temples, looking over the newspaper Mr. Jones had wanted her to top. The headlining story was, '*MUSICIAN MURDERS: Last Notes Lost*.' For what felt like the fifth time that day, she reread over the article; it detailed which musicians had been killed and gave a general idea of when. She'd originally planned on more or less taking the same information to publish in the paper she worked for in order to focus on what she'd really cared about, but now that this was her primary task she paid a little more attention.

Sarah Jane's eyebrows furrowed as she read the names of the deceased again. She recognised them; they'd all been bands she enjoyed as a teenager. All of the members had been relatively young—not much older than her, in their late thirties and early forties. The article had not mentioned this connection, but it'd clearly been written in haste to break the news as early as possible. Sarah Jane took a pad and wrote down the names of the artists.

She called the name of her robotic best friend.

"Yes, Mistress?" the robotic wonder-dog asked as he rolled into the room, ear antennae swiveling.

"You do have databases on Earth information, yes? All up to date?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"Alright, good. I have a few musicians that I need you to tell me about. I need the bands they're in and when they were formed."

Sarah Jane read off the list she'd made. There was a brief silence as he processed the information.

"Charlie Watts and Bill Wyman of The Still Rivers, John Densmore of The Windows, Dennis Wilson of The Tundra Men, Roger Waters of Anderson Council, Chris White and Hugh Grundy of The Ghosts, and Eric Burdon of The Plants. The Still Rivers were formed in 1962, The Windows were formed in 1965, Tundra Men were formed in 1961, Anderson Council was formed in 1965, The Ghosts were formed in 1961, and The Plants were formed in 1962."

Sarah Jane nodded solemnly.

"That's just what I thought—bands from the 60s that are still making music now." She wrote that down on the paper, along with all the bands that the members were associated with. She ran a finger down them, hesitating over Charlie Watts.

"Now we'll never get married," sighed Sarah Jane, who never had a chance in the first place.

"Mistress?"

"Well, I'll carry on. I've got to think of who might be next. Let's see…they were all killed while performing in Liverpool over the past week, but not every band has been killed, though now we know why. Who will be performing in Liverpool soon that matches our description?"

A brief pause.

"The Fauxes will be performing at the Cavern Club in five days."

Sarah Jane's eyes widened. She watched the Fauxes' television show when it'd been shown on BBC1 and BBC2 in the late 60s and used to listen to their music all the time. They'd recently had a comeback following reruns of their show and were touring again. Sarah Jane had been considering going to one of their concerts, but the vast majourity of them were in America.

"The Fauxes! They're sure to be next. When do they fly in?" She asked, a hand hovering over the telephone.

"Tomorrow night, Mistress. They should arrive by 8:43 PM in Liverpool Airport."

Sarah Jane quickly dialed her editor back.

"Mr. Jones?"

"Ms. Smith. I trust you've found your motivation."

"Mr. Jones, all the bands that have had members killed are bands that were formed in the 60s and that are still making music. The Fauxes are flying in tomorrow and will be per-

forming in a few days. I've got to meet them. I think they'll be next—they're the next big-name band from then, and with their recent comeback they're prime targets."

A pause.

"I think I can arrange that."

Sarah Jane was standing at the baggage claim in Liverpool Airport along with Brendan Richards, her aunt's young ward, who had convinced her to take him with her to Liverpool. Brendan held a sign that said 'SIMIO, OPICE, MAC, SINGE' on it while Sarah Jane scanned the crowd. The band was supposed to be arriving low-key, so Sarah Jane's editor had managed to get her to replace the driver that was supposed to be picking them up.

"Weren't they supposed to arrive by 8:43?" Brendan asked, getting a bit tired of holding the sign up. Sarah pushed his elbow so that he'd hold it high enough that it was easily visible.

"I believe our friend meant that'd be when they touched down. It shouldn't be too long now. And remember, don't say anything unless they talk to you. We're supposed to be discreet."

Sarah Jane had already been over this with Brendan, but she felt the need to repeat herself.

"Yes, Sarah," Brendan sighed.

It was a few minutes until Sarah Jane let out an involuntary gasp. Brendan held the sign up a little higher, correctly assuming what'd happened before Sarah Jane pointed somewhat subtly at four men that had not yet noticed them.

"There they are, I'm positive."

Sarah Jane took the sign out of Brendan's hands and held it up higher.

"Hey!" Brendan exclaimed, at which point one of the members pointed and the four of them headed over.

"You must be our driver." Sarah Jane nodded, managing to keep her cool. Brendan, whose knowledge of the Fauxes was quite limited, simply watched the exchange with an eyebrow raised. Each man shook her hand, at which point she'd gathered herself.

"We'll take you to your hotel and get you all set up." Sarah Jane looked over at Brendan, tucking the sign under her arm.

"My assistant will help you with your bags." Two of the heavier bags were handed over to Brendan, his complaint silenced by a sharp glance from Sarah Jane.

"This way."

The six of them walked out to the parking lot, where Sarah Jane had parked a rented limousine. One of the Fauxes whistled as Brendan helped them put their bags in the trunk and Sarah Jane started the car up. Within two minutes Brendan was sitting next to her and the four musicians had climbed into the back. Sarah Jane had purposefully left the newspaper she'd been reading along with some magazines on one of the seats.

Brendan turned to her as she started the car, an unasked question on his lips. Hands still on the wheel as she drove, Sarah Jane formed a three, a two, a one—

The partition snapped open and Thomas Opice, the band's guitarist, leaned forward.

"Have you heard about this?" he asked, rustling the newspaper in his hand.

"About what? The musicians?" Sarah Jane asked.

"Yes, the musicians! We hadn't heard a word of this. Been too busy with touring and practicing and singing to hear any of the news…haven't been near a radio in who knows how long." Sarah Jane was too distracted by his Dixie accent to answer right away.

"Well, they've all been killed over the past week, sir. It's been all over the news here, and I imagine there's been word out in America."

There was a hush in the backseat, followed by a great rumble of worry and whispering. Sarah Jane exchanged a glance with Brendan while Tom looked back over at the newspaper. After about a minute, one of the others pulled Tom out of the way so that they could talk to the drivers while he scrutinised the paper.

"What do you know about it?" Leonard Singe, the Englishman of the group, asked as he leaned on the frame of the partition.

"Oh, not *too* much, sir."

Leo gestured for her to continue while Brendan turned to look out the window, making sure nobody would see his expression at Sarah Jane's act.

"Well, I know all the people that were targeted were in bands that were formed in the sixties and keep making music now. All of them were in fairly big bands, too. Popular."

"*We're* in a fairly popular band that was started in the sixties and still makes music!" drummer Anthony Simio exclaimed. Sarah Jane looked in the rearview mirror to see him join Leo at the partition.

"Well, yes, you are, aren't you?" She asked almost knowingly, and the four Fauxes exchanged glances.

"What else do you know about this?" Tony asked.

"I know that they were all killed after performing in Liverpool."

A collective gulp could be heard from the backseat. Leo and Tony sank back into their chairs.

"Perhaps we should cancel," Curtis Mac suggested, interrupting his and the collective silence.

"We can't cancel! This is a big one, and we're under contract," Leo argued.

"I think they'd reconsider if they knew we had a chance at being killed."

The four argued in the backseat while Sarah Jane and Brendan sat silent, Sarah Jane in particular looking quite pleased with herself. Brendan stole a few glances into the backseat, finding that the men had huddled together to talk it over without them hearing. They didn't bother to put the partition back up, but they didn't have to.

They were still deep in discussion when Sarah Jane pulled into the private parking lot for the hotel that they'd been booked into, in which she'd managed to get a room for herself and Brendan. Sarah Jane intended on staying right with the boys, and she already had an idea of how to get them to agree to it. The wheels had been set in motion.

"We're here, sirs," Sarah Jane announced, and all conversation ceased. The six of them quietly exited the vehicle, Brendan taking two bags up as Sarah Jane checked them in and brought them up to their suite. They were booked for two doubles joined by a connecting door; Leo Singe threw it open while they got settled.

"Well, we'll leave you to it." Sarah

Jane touched Brendan lightly on the arm. The two of them turned to leave and had made a step towards the door when—

"Wait!" Tony exclaimed. Sarah Jane wiped the smile off of her face before she and Brendan turned back to the musicians, three of them gathered on the edge of one bed while Tony stood ready to stop them.

"Yes?"

"Are you busy during the time up until our performance?"

Sarah Jane clicked her tongue.

"Well, I'm a reporter, I've been assigned to do more work on this musician debacle. Looking more into the victims, checking out the scenes, talking to owners—"

"What about preventing *future* victims?"

Sarah Jane couldn't help but smile this time, but she managed to pass it off as being playfully confused.

"I can't predict the future, Mr. Simio."

"Yeah, but think about it. We fit the description. What if we're next?" Tom insisted. Sarah Jane paused as she pretended to think about it.

"I'm just supposed to be a journalist, I'm not supposed to get involved."

Brendan had a very difficult time keeping a straight face.

"We might be able to help you get more information. With our positions we should have more leverage," Tony offered. Sarah Jane didn't give in yet—she wanted all of them to agree.

"Well…"

"Don't think of it as getting involved, think of it as getting ahead of the story," Leo suggested, and the others nodded. Sarah Jane allowed herself to smile.

"Well, alright. I'll help you out. Me and my assistant here are actually staying a few doors down from you in this hotel, so I can keep a close eye on you. If you're willing to help, we should be able to keep you safe. Possibly even find who's doing this." A plan was already forming in Sarah Jane's head as the Fauxes nodded.

Sarah Jane wrote her hotel room down on one of the pads, along with her name. She wrote a note to 'call if necessary!' and handed it to Tony, who immediately tucked it into the room's main mirror.

"That way none of us will forget," he explained.

The four of them were very thankful as they said their goodbyes, insisting that she call them by their first names and let them know if she learned anything important.

The minute Sarah Jane and Brendan watched the door closed, the younger turned to her in amazement.

"You're cleverer than I realised."

Sarah shot him a side eye and he blinked innocently.

"Come on, let's move away from the door." She herded him towards their room, staying silent until they were inside.

"How did you know they'd go along with this?"

"Well, I knew the newspaper would upset them, and after that it was just a matter of making them more worried, and then thinking I was in a position to help. Rather simple, really. Just had to time it correctly."

Brendan nodded, impressed.

"I think I'll start taking lessons from you instead of my teachers."

"How about, in *addition* to your teachers?"

"Deal."

Sarah Jane and Brendan woke up to a loud, shrill sound.

"What's happening?" Sarah Jane groaned from underneath her sheets. Brendan stayed silent as he tried to hide under his pillow. The robot, who had been hidden in a rather heavy suitcase she and Brendan had difficulty bringing up during their check in the day before, wheeled out into the main room.

"The phone is ringing, Mistress."

Sarah Jane looked up at the nightstand.

"So it is. Thank you."

She picked up the receiver and sat up in bed as a voice moving too fast for her to catch said something.

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that?"

"It's Tony Simio. I just said good morning and what can we do today? None of us want to stay in the hotel room but we don't know where we can go that's safe."

Sarah Jane mulled this over. She was almost positive they were all perfectly safe until they actually performed, at which point all bets would be off—but since she was both unsure and knew that the Fauxes would listen to her more if they thought they were in immediate danger, she did not mention this to Tony. He cleared his throat, clearly waiting for an answer.

"Well, I was going to start asking around today. Some of you could join me and some of you could join my assistant Brendan, so long as you don't get recognised. You've got hats and sunglasses and that sort of thing, don't you?"

"Of course. Should we come over when we're ready?"

"No, no, we'll be over in a few minutes. Goodbye, Mr. Simio."

"Tony," Tony insisted, "Goodbye." Sarah Jane let out an agreeable murmur before hanging up and looking over at Brendan.

"I'm sure you heard all that, then?"

"Unfortunately."

"Well, we'd best get up. I already made a list of the places I want to check out today."

Brendan was feeling considerably better once he'd gotten dressed and they'd arrived at the Fauxes room, stretching as they were ushered inside. He was a bit disappointed to see they hadn't ordered breakfast, but it was understandable with how paranoid Sarah Jane had managed to get them. He ignored the rumbling of his stomach.

"Good morning, boys. I'm sure Tony let you know that we're going to get started on some investigation today. I could use you."

All four of them nodded—she got the distinct impression they had not slept well the night before, if at all.

"Two of you will be with me and two of you will be with Brendan here. We'll be doing the same sort of thing, so it doesn't matter much who goes where."

There was a brief discussion before it was decided that Tony and Tom would be going with Sarah Jane, Leo and Curtis resigned to going with Brendan. Brendan frowned at Sarah Jane, clearly aware that everyone would rather go with her.

"Good. If we're split up, we're less likely to be recognised and can cover twice as much ground." A glance at Brendan. "Theoretically."

Brendan scoffed, "I'm sure we'll get just as much work done as you,

Sarah." Sarah Jane gave a short *mm-hmm* and clicked her tongue, giving Brendan a meaningful look that assured him he'd better or else.

The Fauxes were quick to disguise themselves, changing into unassuming clothing and pulling on sunglasses, hats, and in Tony's case, fake facial hair. Sarah Jane gave him an amused smile as he made sure the false moustache was properly aligned above his lip. Leo appeared beside him to check on his hair in the mirror, having tied up the back end of his mullet and proceeded to tuck it into his hat to give the appearance of short hair. Tony glanced at him and frowned; his curly hair was distinctive—perhaps *too* distinctive. Sarah Jane and Brendan exchanged glances as he went to fish out a better hat.

"I'm ready whenever you are," Curtis told Brendan. He'd put on a baseball cap and a pair of visor sunglasses, keeping his overall 'disguise' quite simple. His blonde hair was tied back into a very short ponytail to keep it out of his face—at a glimpse, he admittedly didn't look himself.

"Give me a minute," Leo said before they could take off without him. Tom rolled his eyes and stood next to Sarah Jane, adjusting the leather jacket he'd pulled on over his flannel. With a pair of aviators and a worn baseball cap, Tom looked like the typical everyman that sailed quietly over from America to take in casual sights.

Tony had finally found a knit hat that achieved the desired effect of hiding his hair by the time Leo was satisfied with his outfit, allowing both groups to leave at the same time. Sarah Jane went over the list of Brendan's locations for him again, and he waved the piece of paper she'd given him with all the names on it to get her off his back and on her way.

Sarah Jane, Tom, and Tony all climbed into her Austin Mini Metro convertible, Tony snagging shotgun while Tom sat in the middle of the backseat. Sarah Jane started them off towards the Cavern Club while the two Fauxes stared out at the buildings and people, Tony leaning out the window to get the gentle wind in his face. It was impossible to go any sort of speed, and before they knew it Sarah Jane was parking as close to the Cavern as she could easily get.

"Alright. First off, we're going to the Cavern. Then we'll hit Eric's and Cagney's, maybe the System. Most of them played at the Cavern, but some of them did multiple shows before they got offed. I know Anderson Council's last show was at Eric's," Sarah Jane informed them idly as they followed her towards the club, needing to keep a quick step and stop themselves from any sightseeing. Sarah Jane had a sense of purpose in her step that was both comforting and worrying.

"You haven't told anyone that we're going to be playing, have you?" Tom asked, clearly concerned about her being a reporter. She shot him a glance.

"Whoever may or may not be targeting you already knows. I don't have to report about things like this. My assignment is on the murders. I'm not a sensationalist." She tactfully decided not to mention telling her editor that she thought they'd be next.

"We're here to see George Downey. Nobody's really talked to him yet, so hopefully we'll get some-

thing good. Plus, if he gets uptight, he'll likely want to assuage any of your worries when he finds out you who you are. But it's best to avoid that so we get some semblance of the truth out of him instead of some pathetic reassurances."

Tom and Tony exchanged a glance, wondering just how much of this Sarah Jane already had planned out.

Tony whistled as they descended into the recreation of the original Cavern Club, barely resisting the urge to ogle Beatles memorabilia as they followed Sarah Jane through the tight space. Despite not knowing where she was going, she gave Tom and Tony the security of assuredness. It didn't take her more than a minute to find an employee door and barge in.

"George Downey," she greeted coolly, recognising the face of the man she had just surprised. He blinked, staring at her and the two men behind her, shaded eyes hidden from view.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions."

Brendan had only just walked to the State, having had great difficulty keeping Leo and Curtis from wandering off. Leo held a slight distaste for Liverpool like many Mancunians, but it was battling with his nostalgia for England as a whole after spending so many years living in America. Curtis was simply curious, having not been to England since the Fauxes toured in the 60s. Brendan had had to drag them away from an interesting building or vendor twice en route to their first club.

"Come on, I've got to get this information or Sarah Jane is going to knock all our heads off," he huffed, and they finally entered the club looking for Steve Proctor or an associate. They ran into Proctor's assistant Jody, who was enough of a gossip that they didn't have much trouble learning about the Anderson Council and the Ghosts' performances there.

"It was very expensive to have them come in, let me tell you. But we made enough door sales to cover it up. I got to talk with Roger, Chris, and Hugh before they were gutted. Attitudes, the lot of them, but what do you expect?" Brendan nodded, slightly exasperated.

"But what about any suspicious characters? Any clues that they'd be targeted by someone? Anyone working backstage you didn't know, maybe?" he asked. Jody was a wealth of information, but not the kind he wanted.

"Oh, honey, no, I don't know a person who walks through those doors most of the time. I don't really pay attention to the backstage work, you know. But I do hear the rumours. Did you know that Roger had a big fight with his bandmates? Got real catty, they almost didn't play."

"What's new?" Curtis said dryly, and Jody burst out laughing.

"That's what I said!"

Brendan, Curtis, and Leo left just as clueless as they'd been when they got there. Brendan shook it off and took out the list.

"Alright, now we're going to the Club Continental." They found themselves at a fancy deal with private valets, feeling rather out of place as they walked in. Brendan's nervousness attracted attention immediately, and the desk clerk was at their side.

"Do you need something?" he sniffed, eyebrow raised.

"We need to talk to someone about the Still Waters' performance here," Brendan explained, and the man's eyes narrowed.

"You're not with the press, are you?"

"*I'm* not, no. None of us are," Brendan said, truthfully.

The man considered the statement for a few seconds before huffing and leading them out of the lobby and through a side door, down a hallway, and into a small office. A man wreathed in cigar smoke was sitting at a desk and reading the paper as they came in, glancing up with tired eyes.

"Something about the Still Waters, sir," the employee explained, and the man gave a short nod. Brendan, Leo, and Curtis were suddenly inside the office, door shut, employee gone.

"What is it?" the man asked brusquely. Curtis and Leo exchanged a glance.

"We'd just like to know about how the Still Waters were here before, you know. We know some people who'll be performing in the Cavern soon and we're worried about them," Brendan said nervously, hands behind his back to hide the twiddling of his fingers.

The man sighed heavily, motioning for Brendan to sit down. There was only one chair, so Leo and Curtis stood at his shoulders.

"Yes, yes. Pity that. Good men, you know. Good men," the man blustered, "Shame we couldn't have done anything. Nothing to do, really, very unexpected, very unexpected."

"Do you know anything about it? Did anything strange happen?" Leo asked.

"Oh, well, you know, I'm very busy, very busy. Didn't hear any reports of anything unusual, no. What's unusual with a crowd like that? Hmm? Yes, yes, big crowd. Many faces. Couldn't have told you half of them. But no, no. Nothing strange that I know of. Nothing strange at all."

A few minutes of circular conversation like this and Brendan politely excused himself, Curtis and Leo following his example and hiking it out of the club before someone suspected them of something unsavoury.

"We're going nowhere. I hope Sarah's got something," Brendan complained as they headed for Bunters—another dead end, though they weren't aware of it.

By the time Sarah Jane and her entourage were escorted out of the Cavern Club, she'd gotten more information than she'd originally hoped for. There was a grin on her face as the bouncer blocked the way back inside.

"Thanks for all the help, Jack," she told him with a grin, giving him a two fingered salute. His expression was impassive as she started off in the direction of Eric's, Tom and Tony right behind her.

"Do you think he was serious?" Tony asked.

"Oh, surely. You saw the look on his face. I bet he thinks it's a whole conspiracy."

Unseen to her, both Fauxes paled.

"Do you really think there's more than one person behind this?" Tom asked, and Sarah Jane shrugged lightly.

"Well, I suppose there's weight to the theory. They *were* all killed within the span of a week, you'd think something like that would need a team of some sort—especially with stars that high calibre, out of their prime or not.

I'm surprised people were even allowed to *breathe* on Roger Waters, let alone get close enough to off him. But we'll see what the others say. Most of what ol' Georgy gave us was speculation, though did you notice something interesting? He said that the Still Waters were nervous before their show. Sounds uncharacteristic, don't you think?"

Tom and Tony exchanged a glance. They had not caught onto that detail consciously enough to think it over. Their paces quickened to keep closer to Sarah Jane as their minds spun; did the bands know that they were in danger?

Tony and Tom had gotten more and more nervous as they went to the different clubs, Tony visibly worried as his hands flexed and his feet tapped. Sarah Jane decided to give them a break after they finished with Eric's and Cagney's, taking them to El Macho's. They sat at a table in front of the restaurant in case Brendan, Leo, and Curtis happened to walk by on their ways around.

"Maybe they were just nervous because they knew other musicians were being targeted," Tom said after Tony's leg bouncing distracted him from the menu.

"Ah, but Anderson Council was reported to be nervous despite their fighting, and Roger was offed first," Sarah Jane reminded them, putting them all back on edge. She looked them over and gave a very short sigh before adopting a sympathetic look.

"Is there anyone you've heard of that you would be worried about?" she asked, and they shook their heads.

"The only people we're worried about are the paparazzi. They were insane in the 60s and they're being insane again now that we're touring," Tom groused, and Tony laughed dryly in agreement.

"Well, I suppose you wouldn't know, being so focused in America. All the other bands have been doing big European circuits before stopping in Liverpool. Lucky us the fab four didn't get back together, I suppose."

All three of them were silent as the waitress came and took their orders, giving a soft giggle at the way Tom pronounced his dish before disappearing again. Tony smirked, and Tom glared at him for a moment.

"Oh, what a coincidence. Brendan!" Sarah Jane shouted as Brendan, Leo, and Curtis appeared walking past. Brendan located Sarah Jane immediately and came over, pulling a table over and sitting down next to her. Leo and Curtis nodded to their bandmates and sat down after a glance around.

"So, did you learn anything?" Sarah Jane asked.

Brendan sighed. "Not really. They weren't any help, Sarah. Just kept saying that they didn't see anything suspicious and that it was a shame."

Sarah Jane knitted her brows.

"Well, *someone* must have seen something. I mean, they were killed as they were surrounded by crowds. It wasn't by any means private. There are photographs of them dying in *The Echo*!" she insisted.

The Fauxes exchanged nervous glances.

"Sarah Jane, do you know the method they were killed with? The newspaper we saw in the limousine didn't say?" Tony asked, leaning towards her.

"Oh, I don't know. I'm not exactly working with the police. All I know is that it wasn't a bullet. You can tell by the way that they were injured. But they alluded to it being a projectile, so I suspect it was something poisonous thrown at them, considering how quickly they died. Must be able to get them from quite a distance, considering the crowds. Either that or someone's going right up to them and poking them with poison needles."

There was a collective scrape as all four Fauxes drew their chairs closer to Sarah Jane at the tables.

"*Sarah*," said Brendan, and Sarah Jane sighed.

"I'm sure you're all right for now. Nobody's seen through anything," she assured them, remaining purposefully vague. They unstiffened, but not entirely.

The waitress returned with the first-comers' food, pausing to take the stragglers' orders. Once she was gone Sarah Jane began to eat, but Tony and Tom simply stared down at their food. Sarah Jane gave them a hard glance as Brendan contemplated asking them for their meals.

"You must eat, we've got a long few days ahead of us. If you don't have enough food you won't be at enough attention to know if something's happening."

This urging was enough to get them to start, but Tom didn't finish his food. As the second set of orders came out, Leo and Curtis couldn't bring themselves to finish their full plates either. Tony had the rest of Tom's while Leo and Curtis let Brendan finish what they'd started.

"Alright. I'm going to go to the System. Did you finish your list off, Brendan?"

Brendan nodded.

"I suggest you, Curtis, and Leo go on back to the hotel. Are you two ready to go?"

"Do you mind if I go back to the hotel with them?" Tom asked. A cursory glance wouldn't betray it, but Sarah Jane was well aware that he was nervous. She knew he'd feel safer at the hotel, and it was possible that he might clam up whoever she'd end up talking to at the System if they picked up on it.

"Well, alright. But you can't all go back. I don't want you four travelling together, I'm afraid it might make it more obvious who you are."

"Don't worry, I'm happy to come with you," Tony jumped in before any of the Fauxes could worry about who'd be left out of the safety of the hotel room. They gave him a curt smile and he turned to Sarah Jane with a grin.

"Shall we go, then?"

Sarah Jane nodded and the six of them stood up, Brendan starting off towards the hotel with all three worried musicians behind him. Sarah Jane went to pay for the meal, but Tony insisted on covering it before following her back outside.

"You're not as worried as the others?" She asked passively as they walked side by side.

"Oh, I am, I'm just too curious not to want to look into it."

"At least you're honest."

Most of the walk was silent; Sarah Jane's thoughts were running through her head, trying to make sense of big musicians being killed surrounded by people after shows at packed clubs without anyone willing to talk about

seeing anything particularly suspicious. Whatever was happening, it was subtle and clever—taking advantage of the noise and chaos that ensued after a performance.

Tony's mind, too, was occupied; he'd felt fear for his life a few times in the 60s when he was surrounded by rabid fans, but never an outright threat of death. The legitimate concern about being murdered was never something he thought he'd feel. Hands deep in his jacket pockets, Tony was glad he was with someone who seemed so sure of what to do.

Sarah Jane led him into the System, past the rockabilly memorabilia and towards the stage. She went right on through to the employee's section like she'd done for the past three clubs, nobody even questioning her. She certainly looked like she knew what she was doing

Michael Melody, the current owner of the club, didn't look very surprised when she found him in his office.

"Ah, someone told me you'd be coming. Sarah Jane, is it?" he asked.

Sarah Jane nodded.

"Well, sit down, I know you've got some questions for me."

Sarah Jane sat in the chair across from his desk, Tony standing behind her with his hands on the chair's back. Sarah Jane was leaned forwards far enough not to realise, as she was looking at Mike Melody with a probing stare.

"The Ghosts, The Plants, The Tundra Men, and The Windows all performed here. For The Windows, it was their last performance with John Densmore, before he died on your dancefloor."

"Ah-ah, not technically. He wasn't pronounced dead until he was off property. But otherwise, yes."

Sarah Jane nodded, glad that Melody at least seemed to want to talk it straight.

"You're not the first reporter to come here asking questions, Miss Sarah Jane, though you *are* the first to have the chutzpah to barge into my office. I've told *The Echo* what they wanted to know."

Sarah Jane smiled.

"I'm sure you have. But I'm not with *The Echo*, and I want more than just a cursory 'oh yes they played here,' Mr. Melody. Why don't you tell me everything you know about what happened, and we can see if you can help me? In the long run, you may help catch a killer. After all—who wants to play at your venue if they're worried they'll die there?"

Melody's smile dropped for a few seconds.

"Nothing unusual happened with anyone except The Windows aside from some paranoia caused by the deaths. For The Windows it was much the same; a little nervous, but they did their performance well. Then they left the stage and went into the paparazzi trap. You must understand that I wasn't exactly keeping a personal eye on them—I heard most of this from my assistant, Peter."

Sarah Jane did not blink as she kept gaze with him.

"Anyroad, they were surrounded by press. Absolutely surrounded. It was difficult to know anything that was happening with the crowd, the fans, the cameras going off—all I know is that I heard someone scream and Peter saw someone go down. It was John. They carried him out into the street to

give him some air, but by the time the medics arrived he was gone. Peter said he saw some kind of dart in John's neck. I think that's what must have killed him."

Tony stiffened as he recalled Sarah Jane's earlier suspicions that the musicians had been hit by some kind of poisoned projectile. Sarah Jane's reaction to this information was to let a smile tug at the side of her mouth, fingers lacing on her lap. She leaned back and ignored the sudden contact with Tony's fingers between her and the chair.

"I see. I'd like to talk to Peter, if you don't mind, but I've got another question for you before that. Were any of the windows broken in your establishment?"

Melody nodded, "A few, yes. But I'm not sure when they were broken, before or after he was attacked. Some people just wanted to get out of there and were willing to break through windows and crawl out of them to do it."

Sarah Jane considered this as Mike Melody paged Peter, the harried assistant hurrying into the room within two minutes. He rushed past Sarah Jane and Tony to get next to Melody, who gestured to the two guests.

"These people would like to talk with you about the other night, Peter."

Peter gulped but turned to them diligently. Sarah Jane softened her expression.

"Hello, Peter, my name's Sarah Jane. I'd just like to know a little bit more about what you saw happen to John Densmore."

In a shaking voice, Peter told them a slightly more detailed and harried account of what Melody had told them.

"Anything else, Peter?"

Peter glanced at Melody, who nodded.

"Uhm. Well. I don't—I'm not sure. It was while all the lights were flashing. He was fine, and suddenly something was in his neck and he was going down. I—I'm not sure where it came from."

Sarah Jane considered this, nodding.

"Alright. Thank you very much Peter, Mr. Melody. I'll let you know if I quote either of you on anything ahead of time."

They nodded, and Sarah Jane left with Tony right behind her having never said a word. He followed her as she crossed the dance floor, taking careful account of the broken windows and what was nearby them. After a circuitous route around the venue they were finally outside, Sarah Jane noting the broken windows from the outside of the building before she started in the direction of her car.

"What do you think, Sarah Jane?"

"I think that I have to go over everything I learned today carefully."

Tony nodded, keeping right next to her as they found their way back to the car. He sat stiffly in shotgun as they drove back to the hotel, staring pensively out of the window. Sarah Jane was too absorbed in her thoughts to really realise how quiet he was being—neither of them realised that they hadn't put the radio on and rode in silence the whole way back.

Tony stuck quietly beside her as they headed back up to his room, Sarah Jane following. The other four Fauxes were there with Brendan, who had been telling them about his studies

to distract them.

"How'd it go?" Leo asked.

"We got some good information. I'll take Brendan off your hands and wish you an early night. I've got a lot of thinking to do," Sarah Jane replied, Brendan standing up at a subtle gesture of her hand while Tony walked over to the closest bed and sat heavily upon it.

"Alright. Goodnight," Leo said, the others mirroring the sentiment.

"Try and get some sleep tonight," she said, and they nodded as she and Brendan left the room.

"You've certainly got them wound up tighter than a drum," Brendan said as they walked back to their hotel room, Sarah Jane's robot greeting them as they entered. Sarah Jane quickly closed and locked the door behind them so nobody would pass by and see him.

"It's better this way. If they're scared, they'll be vigilant. I know that it's not so great for them, but don't you think it's better that they're aware and worried something will happen rather than being oblivious and probably getting knocked off?"

Brendan had no good argument for this, so he shrugged.

"I suppose so."

Sarah Jane nodded as walked over to the hotel room's desk, pulling a pad of paper and a pen out of her purse.

"You can turn on the television low or and go to sleep when you can, Brendan. I'm going to collect my thoughts."

"Alright, Sarah."

Sarah Jane turned all her attention to the paper, writing out everything she'd heard that day to help organise her thoughts and prevent her from forgetting anything. Things were starting to vaguely come into place, a few theories developing in her mind.

Sarah Jane was woken up by the shrill sound of the telephone at a frankly unreasonable hour. She lifted her head from her desk, groaning slightly at the crick in her neck as she stood up and stumbled over to the nightstand. Brendan growled from under his covers and turned away from the phone as Sarah Jane nearly tripped on her robot.

She didn't get to the phone in time for it to stop ringing, sighing loudly as she picked up the receiver to redial. She didn't get the chance, however, because it fell out of her hand when someone started pounding maniacally on the door.

"Sarah Jane, wake up!" The voice came through the door.

She carefully traversed around her robot and opened the door about a foot before Tony Simio managed to break through it.

"What?" Sarah Jane tried to ask, but was interrupted.

"Someone was in our room. Someone was in our room!" He was too freaked out to stay quiet, but Brendan had stopped growling and grown silent.

"Alright, alright. It's okay, Tony, just tell me how you know that."

"Come on!" Tony grabbed her hand and she was dragged out of her room, down the hall, and into the Fauxes' rooms, where the other three members were packing their belongings up as quickly as they could. All of them were still in their pyjamas, clearly having acted immediately after one of them realised something had occurred.

Tony took her over to the desk, pointing with a slightly shaking hand at what appeared to be a playing card.

"None of us put that there! We don't even have playing cards with us. And there weren't any in the room. Someone came in here while we were sleeping and put it on our desk!" The others shouted their agreement loudly enough that Sarah Jane held up a hand and motioned for them to quiet down before they got a noise complaint.

Reaching forwards for the card, Sarah Jane quickly turned it over. On the other side, instead of a regular card face, there was an interesting symbol stamped on. She raised an eyebrow and brought the card closer to inspect it, Tony putting his hands on her shoulders and leaning forwards to see better. She sniffed but didn't say anything.

"I think I've seen this somewhere before," Sarah Jane said after a tense silence—even the other Fauxes had stopped what they were doing when she picked up the card to stare.

"Where?"

"I'm not sure, I just said I *think*, didn't I?"

Further silence as she squinted at the card.

"We can't stay in this room anymore. That had to be left by the killer. We were all asleep! They could come in here and kill us at any time!" Leo exclaimed as he broke the silence by loudly zipping his suitcase shut.

"I highly doubt they'll kill you in their sleep if they didn't do it when they had the chance," Sarah Jane replied, a bit curious as to why none of them were dead.

"I don't care," Curtis argued, "I'm not staying in this room anymore. Where else could we stay in the area?"

Sarah Jane gave a quick sigh. She was not paying for another hotel room somewhere else in order to keep an eye on them, as compromised as this hotel may or may not be. Her eyebrows raised, and she turned to Curtis with a smile. Maybe this hotel *wasn't* compromised.

"You can stay in my room with me and Brendan. It'll be a tighter fit, but it'll be safer. Here's what we're going to do: we're going to check you out of this hotel and you're going to ask the concierge to recommend another hotel to you. Don't take all of your luggage but take a bag each. Then we'll go downstairs, you'll change shirts and hats in my car, and come in to bring your suitcases back up to my room. The killer must have gotten the information about you staying here from either the staff or the press, so they'll think you've left and assume you're staying elsewhere."

It took about an hour for them to complete this process, Sarah Jane waiting patiently in her room for them to come up with their things and her keys. Brendan had woken up at this point and gotten the low down from her, helping her put her robot back in the suitcase they'd brought him in and shut him off before the Fauxes could see him.

Sarah Jane and Brendan helped them shove their suitcases into the closet before they all sat down nervously on Sarah Jane's bed, Brendan still occupying his. Sarah Jane joined him, sitting on the edge and facing the musicians.

"I'm sure none of you want to go out today."

They shook their heads.

"That's perfectly alright. I think I've gotten about all the information I could get from interviews at this point anyway. Your concert is tomorrow, and you need to be ready for it, so try and get some sleep despite the size of the room. Me and Brendan are going to go out, so you have room."

There was an immediate disagreement as all four of them started talking at once, the general gist insisting desperately that she stay. Sarah Jane blinked, exchanging a glance with Brendan before holding up her hands and ceasing the cacophony.

"Alright, alright. I'll stay, Brendan will go and get us all something to eat. But I urge you to make use of both beds once he's out of his."

Brendan slunk out from his covers and went to his suitcase to retrieve day clothes, disappearing into the bathroom. Sarah Jane got up and sat down at the chair in front of the desk, glancing down at her notes. She put the playing card down with them before turning back to the Fauxes.

"Please get some rest."

Sarah Jane was almost entirely oblivious of the hectic condition of the hotel room. After Brendan had returned with breakfast Curtis and Tom had fallen asleep, leaving Tony and Leo to keep Brendan more than occupied. Sarah Jane focused on her notes, staring at the symbol on the card and trying to remember where she'd seen it when she had blocks in thought.

The phone rang, and everyone went silent, Curtis and Tom sitting up from the bed they were sharing. Everyone stared at Sarah Jane as she walked over to the line and picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Ms. Smith, you haven't updated me in two days. What's the situation with the murders?"

"Oh, hello, Mr. Jones. Yes, well, my hunch was right. I'm looking into leads on how the killer is doing it. I've heard that it's by projectile. I've got a witness who states that he saw what appeared to be a dart or dart-like object enter the neck of John Densmore that he believes killed him. I also talked to several club owners who all told me about the bands being nervous before the show—even Anderson Council, and Roger Waters was the first to go."

"Good work, Ms. Smith. The evening's paper will say that witness statements describe darts entering the victims to kill them. Do you have any idea how they got there?"

Sarah Jane hummed. She was very aware that everyone in the hotel room was listening to her.

"I have a working theory, but I'm not positive yet. It's definitely being shot into them, but I'm not sure from where. One location reported broken windows, so it could be from outside the venues, but I'm not so sure about that. I'll let you know when I've got something more concrete."

Mr. Jones grunted but didn't argue.

"Alright. Call me immediately upon getting more information. I'm outdoing *The Echo* this time."

Sarah Jane chuckled.

"Good luck doing that, with the photographs they've been publishing. It seems they always have a photographer right in front of the victims as they're killed."

"Yeah, yeah. They'll see," Mr. Jones growled, giving a short goodbye and hanging up.

"Who was that?" Tom asked.

"My editor," Sarah Jane replied, walking back over to her desk.

"Do you really have a working theory on what's happening?" Tony sounded hopeful.

"I'm working on it."

Sarah Jane went back to her scribbling, leaving the other five occupants to wonder exactly how much she may or may not have figured out.

It was hours later that Sarah Jane fell asleep, putting her head down at the desk. Tom and Curtis shared one bed, Leo and Tony ending up in the other. Brendan was curled up in the room's sofa chair. As the six of them slept on, Sarah Jane's fingers rested upon the playing card. For a few hours, nobody was conscious of where the Fauxes were, having seemingly vanished into the morning light hours prior.

Sarah Jane was woken by the commotion of four musicians all trying to get ready at once in a double. They had to be at the Cavern at a decent time for rehearsal and stage check, so when Sarah Jane squinted at the nearby clock, it was only ten in the morning. Their performance wasn't until six that night.

"Sarah Jane! You're awake," Tony said with an audible grin as she sat up. Tony was wearing a pair of slightly baggy white trousers and white socks with an undershirt on, pulling a white button up on as she turned to him and the rest of the room. Curtis was sitting on the bed closest to her, wearing baggy red trousers and a blue sleeveless button he'd left the top four buttons open for. He glanced up at her as he pulled on his white oxfords, giving a passive smile before looking back down to tie them.

"Yes, I'm awake," she agreed. Brendan was still sleeping on the chair, seemingly adapted to sleeping in sound over the past two nights.

"We've got to go to the soundcheck at the Cavern once we're all ready. We were going to call a taxi, but could you drive us?" Tony asked. She could see on his face that he wasn't comfortable taking a taxi now that none of them were going to be in disguise.

"Of course, if you can all fit in the Mini."

"I'm sure we can squeeze in," Curtis replied, and Sarah Jane nodded. Leo came out of the bathroom wearing white trousers not unlike Tony's with white oxfords and a neon pink button up, clearly having just finished going over his hair. Tony sat down to pull on his own pair of white oxfords, which appeared to be the shoe of the group. Leo took a white jacket out of an open suitcase and was pulling it on when he noticed Sarah Jane was awake.

"Oh, good. Good morning. Sorry if we woke you."

"It's quite alright. How are you all feeling?"

A pause.

"Nervous," Curtis said flatly, and the others nodded in agreement.

"It's best if you don't pretend anything's wrong," Sarah Jane informed them, having a very clear idea of how she wanted to figure out who the killer was.

The three Fauxes present exchanged glances. Sarah Jane hadn't said anything, but they all got a sudden prick in their hearts.

"You're not using us as bait to catch the murderer, are you?" Curtis asked.

Sarah Jane scoffed.

"No. If I were doing that I'd publicly announce a record signing and wait for something to happen in a controlled environment."

They appeared to accept this answer, going back to getting ready with a few murmured apologies for accusing her of such a thing.

Tom left the bathroom fully dressed in a fully white suit, the only colour in his outfit a blue tie. He sat down beside Curtis, who had finished getting ready once he'd gotten his shoes on and pulled on a red suit jacket. Leo sat down on the other bed as Tony pulled on a powder blue knee length jacket, pushing the sleeves until they came halfway up his forearms.

They all turned to Sarah Jane, who stood.

"Alright. Let's go."

Brendan remained sleeping in the chair as they all went down the back stairs to the private garage, piling into Sarah Jane's small car. Tony managed to snag shotgun, the other three crowding into the back two seats. Once they were as situated as they could get, they left the garage in silence, air electric with fear and nervousness.

"Now boys," Sarah Jane started when they got halfway to the Cavern, "I can't come in with you after getting informally kicked out the other day, so I'll drive you up to the front and leave you as close as I can. I'll come back here with Brendan once it gets closer to your show, so I can blend into the crowd. I just want you to stay as calm as you can, alright?"

There was a murmur before they agreed. Sarah Jane patted the closest Faux, Tony, on the arm to try and calm him down. They drew into silence again before suddenly bursting into conversation as the Cavern came into view and Sarah Jane slowed down.

"Woah, woah. I wouldn't leave you all alone if I didn't think it would okay. You'll be fine. Just go in and act naturally."

The four Fauxes exchanged glances before turning back to Sarah Jane.

"Alright."

"We'll do our best to keep our cool."

"See you soon, Sarah Jane."

"Thanks for driving us."

Sarah Jane nodded as they exited the car, watching them enter the Cavern Club and leaving only when the door closed behind them. With a heavy sigh, Sarah Jane headed back for the hotel.

Once she was back in her room she called her editor back.

"Mr. Jones, I just dropped the Fauxes off at the Cavern Club. I think it's going to happen today, but don't say anything. I've been thinking. I only heard of glass being broken at one location, and if it was a dart, it would have lost a lot of momentum going through glass. I think it's being done by someone inside the club. Several people talked about there being huge crowds and a lot of general pandemonium. Someone's taking advantage of the chaos to off these people without being detected."

"Good thinking, Ms. Smith. I'll make a note of that. Make sure you're at the Fauxes' performance tonight and see what you can learn. Don't get hurt, but if you can prevent one of them from dying, we'll all be glad."

"Of course, Mr. Jones. I'll talk to you later."

Sarah Jane hung up the phone, eye-

brows furrowing. Would Peter have seen someone press the dart into John's neck, or did it have to be expelled from somewhere nearby? It would have to be very close to hit the intended target accurately. Where could they be coming from?

Brendan, who'd been in and out of sleep since the Fauxes had risen, finally woke up to find Sarah Jane lost in her thoughts at the desk. Brendan yawned, eliciting no reaction before getting up and getting changed. He came back in and sat down at the edge of his bed, watching her for a while before clearing his throat.

"It's nearly five, Sarah. We should get going soon."

"Oh, alright, Brendan," she replied, making absolutely no moves to get ready to go soon. Brendan sighed and looked at the playing card in her hands.

"It's interesting, isn't it? Leaving a warning. Sort of big headed, wouldn't you say?"

Sarah Jane nodded passively before sitting up and furrowing her brows.

"It *is*, isn't it? Why risk breaking into someone's room and possibly waking them up to leave a warning when you want to kill them so discreetly? Unless…" She turned back to her notes, murmuring something under her breath.

"Unless?" Brendan asked cluelessly.

"Unless it *isn't* discreet. These people are being killed publicly, surrounded by their fans, in the flash of the cameras. And yet, there are no photographs of the actual murders taking place, just tremendous depictions of death ready for the cover of *The Echo*. I don't understand it."

Sarah Jane looked at the card again.

"Sensationalist…ready for the cover. The dart's coming from someone close by. There's too much chaos from the flashing of cameras to tell what's happening—and then suddenly they're dead."

Her eyes didn't drop from the card as she addressed Brendan, "Go find me as many days of *The Echo* as you can that report on the murders."

Brendan returned half an hour later with several newspapers, many of which he'd asked people for personally or found in paper bins. Sarah Jane put the card down and thumbed through them, looking at the photographer credits under the black and whites of the dying stars.

"All of the ones right on the front are photographs by Rafel Bert. He's been at every single murder, right at the forefront, taking a photograph just as the moment occurs."

Now that they were looking for it, both Sarah Jane and Brendan could see the darts in the victims' necks, mostly obscured by shadows, clothing, and wild paparazzi.

Sarah Jane gave a short gasp, grabbing the card and shooting up to stand.

"What, what is it Sarah?"

"The card. This symbol—it's the symbol for film. I've seen them on cameras. Our killer is Rafel Bert, the photographer. I don't know how he's doing it, but he must have something on his camera that launches poisoned darts. He's going to get to the Fauxes right after they get off the stage!"

After calling her editor and informing him that she was almost certain Bert was committing the crimes and to hold until she made sure, Sarah Jane and

Brendan drove as quickly as they could manage to the Cavern Club. Traffic was rough, and Sarah Jane was worried they weren't going to get there in time.

She glanced at her watch. It was already six o'clock—their set had started. It was only going to last half an hour, at which point she'd only just be parking. Traffic was standstill.

Sarah Jane put the car in park.

"Brendan. You drive the rest of the way. I'm getting out and going there before anything happens."

Brendan turned to her in shock.

"What! I don't have a license!"

"It's easy, you've practised before. Just press the pedals and turn the wheels. If I don't go now he's going to get to them before I do!"

Brendan had no room to argue as Sarah Jane unbuckled herself and, within a moment, was gone. Brendan hurried out the car and jumped into the driver's seat, watching her sprinting down the sidewalk as he fumbled to buckle up and change gears so that he could move once traffic let up.

Sarah Jane was at the Cavern Club within five minutes, bursting through the door and down the stairs. She was immediately swept into the crowd, barely making out the Fauxes' singing as everyone screamed and cheered around her. Amidst the deafening noise Sarah Jane tried to locate Rafel Bert. She'd met him when she was doing freelance reporting, just long enough to be able to recognise his face now.

It was impossible to discern anyone in the mass of people. The frantic energy of a crowd that may or may not have been aware of the fact that the band was in danger of death combined with the mania of a band long off the road returning to the stage, taken up a notch further by the fact that they were playing in the famous Cavern Club. It was difficult for Sarah Jane to stay focused as she was dragged with the sway of the crowd, staring into faces already hard to see in the dark of the room.

Sarah Jane was still looking when the Fauxes announced that they were thankful for the opportunity to play and that they hoped to see them soon. Sarah Jane tried her best to rush over to the stage, but a few dozen other people had the same idea and she started to grow desperate as cameras began to flash.

Shoving and kicking her way forwards, Sarah Jane managed to get close to the band members. The room appeared to have given way to strobe light as the Fauxes posed and pushed through the crowd, staring blindly into the sea of faceless photographers. Sarah Jane stared at them, trying to get an ID before it was too late.

One of the cameras was bulkier than the rest, difficult to notice at first but catching her eye after its photographer came further forwards. Sarah Jane's eyes widened.

"BERT!"

Even amidst the hysteria the photographer heard his name being called, flinching as he tried to enact his grim task. Sarah Jane grabbed him, the crowd seeming not to notice as she pulled him away. The Fauxes noticed, however, and at their worried expressions everyone began to scream.

Sarah Jane wrestled with Rafel Bert as he tried to get away, the commotion now deafening as people stampeded

towards the exit. Tony Simio came through the crowd and grabbed Sarah Jane and Bert, seemingly having worked up the courage despite realising what had almost happened. The other Fauxes appeared to help and Bert was held in a head lock and a body hold as the sound of sirens began wailing outside of the venue.

The Fauxes and Sarah Jane managed to keep Bert secured as the last of the fans scrambled out, finally giving the police a chance to descend into the club. Sarah Jane explained what had almost happened and Rafel Bert was placed under arrest, his camera confiscated with the poison dart intended for a Faux still inside the custom accessory.

After statements were made, Sarah Jane and the Fauxes were allowed to exit the club. A very nervous Brendan was waiting for them, having parked the car in the middle of the road due to the immense traffic.

"What happened? Wait, tell me in the car, we have to go before the road's cordoned off and the press realises they're out here," Brendan buzzed, and the six of them squeezed into the car. Sarah Jane took off as fast as she could through gaps in the cars, heading back for the hotel.

The Fauxes were in shock on the way back, only giving way to a barrage of conversation when they were safely in the hotel room.

Patiently, Sarah Jane explained how she'd figured it out.

"You saved us," Tony said in awe, and the others nodded along. Sarah Jane smiled.

"Just trying to do my part."

Sarah Jane sat in a visitation room across from Rafel Bert, a recorder in one hand and the playing card in the other. Bert had refused to talk to any member of the press aside from her, knowing full well that she was the one who'd figured him out.

"Why'd you do it?"

Rafel Bert smiled.

"For the front cover."

Sarah Jane raised an eyebrow.

"Front page news sells, and it pays to be on the cover. Those photographs went for hundreds and hundreds of pounds, and I pushed *The Echo* ahead of everyone else. That pays. Money's money."

Sarah Jane gave a sigh, holding up the card.

"And what about this?"

Bert shrugged.

"Felt I should give them a warning. It's only fair."

Sarah Jane nodded, got up, and signaled the guard to take Rafel Bert back to his cell. She shook her head all the way to the nearest payphone, ringing her boss and telling him about the information.

"Some people really are just that crazy for money," Mr. Jones explained with an audible shrug.

"It's still jarring to see it, Mr. Jones."

"Well, no worries, Sarah. I got ahead of *The Echo*, and you got something too."

"What?"

"You're on the front cover."

Sarah Jane, Superstar!

Joshua Wanisko & Lillian Wanisko

The Black Light Tavern was the armpit of the universe, and Gleep-Glop knew armpits, having five of his own on his starfish body. The Tavern was hidden in a back alley off a dark street in a bad neighborhood and it smelled of stale smoke, cheap beer and abandoned dreams. It was a dive, in a word, but this was by design. The proprietors, ignorant as they were of human psychology had hoped this characteristic would persuade local humans to pass over the grotty little hole in the wall for more reputable establishments, and thereby allow the intended customer base of expatriate extraterrestrials to congregate in peace. Not a bad plan, in theory, but they underestimated the vicissitudes university students would weather in pursuit of an inexpensive pint.

Every attempt to be rid of the students simply attracted more of them and any more direct action would surely bring unwanted attention. By this time, word had spread about The Black Light and it had slowly built up a crew of regular customers from amongst the aliens living below the radar in 1980s Great Britain. Rather than shutting down and relocating they decided (reluctantly) to allow the humans. Those alien patrons who could not pass for human initially wore skinsuit disguises of various sorts when there were humans in the tavern, but this guideline was relaxed as they learned which humans would be comfortable with aliens among them.

Gleep-Glop wasn't the alien's real name, of course. His real name was one of those "unpronounceable by humans" numbers, and as the concepts represented by the name in his mother tongue had no analogue in any human language he was saddled with an embarrassing nickname for the foreseeable future. Despite all this, he liked his fellow aliens and tolerated the human customers with

their disgusting bilaterally symmetrical bodies and stupid stomachs that don't even turn inside-out.

He was working the door one slow Tuesday night when a female human entered. She looked around the smoky dimness of the room before turning to speak to him. "I'm here about the play. I'm Sarah Jane Smith."

Gleep-Glop popped a chunk of coral into the mouth of his human suit and chewed it, regarding her. He didn't really enjoy the taste of coral, but he knew that earth starfish consumed it and he was doing his best to fit in with the indigenous population. She held up a sheet of paper advertising a garage band and smiled eagerly at him. At least, he assumed the expression was a smile. All these humans looked the same to him.

The idea behind The Black Light Tavern was that it would hide in plain sight. The humans would see a dingy pub and would ignore it. We've just covered in some detail how well this particular strategy worked. Similarly, advertising for the tavern was written in ultraviolet ink, beyond the segment of the spectrum than human eyes could perceive, but perfectly visible to most aliens. To human eyes, it was merely a flyer for a fictional band at a non-existent venue, but to alien eyes (or to the eyes of a human with a black light) it was an open call for auditions for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Croydon: The Sarah Jane Story.*

The eyes of Gleep's species are light receptors on the tips of their arms, so he could only roll them in a metaphorical sense, which he did. *Ugh. Actors.* He would be pleased when this play was over, and he could go back to his tide pool. Gleep shrugged and stepped aside to let her pass. "Don't know. Talk to the director."

The other aliens didn't get it. They were amateurs. He was an auteur. The Director had made a study of humanity. The Director knew what directors looked like, how they dressed, how they acted. He scowled in his high-backed chair and barked instructions at his crew. The Director was attired as his study of humanity had led him to believe directors dressed. He wore jodhpurs and held a riding crop and megaphone. He ruled his production with an iron fist (this was not merely a metaphor; the Director's species had evolved from sentient weather vanes) and there were those among the crew who felt that he was an over-the-top caricature of a megalomaniacal tyrant who could not possibly exist in real life, but this sentiment was not shared by those who had previously worked in community theater. Those individuals felt, if anything, that the Director was underplaying the part.

Sarah Jane approached him. "I'm Sarah Jane Smith. The alien in the unconvincing disguise told me to talk to you."

He evaluated and dismissed her in a glance. There was no need to use the megaphone when she was three feet away, but he did so anyway. "Talk to my assistant. Elisabeth!"

A bright-eyed young woman materialized. Sarah Jane couldn't help but notice the contrast between Elisabeth and the Director. They seemed like the result of some bizarre

Transmat accident that had taken a single individual and separated out all the cynicism and unpleasantness into one body and placed all the optimism and idealism into the other. Elisabeth handed her a leaf of paper. “Can you read these lines for me, dear?”

Sarah Jane examined it skeptically.

"Yes, Doctor,” she read.

Elisabeth nodded. “Very good.”

"No, Doctor,” she read.

Elisabeth nodded again. “You have a knack for this.”

"I don’t understand, Doctor.”

Elisabeth frowned, but encouragingly. “No, like you’re a child watching at home and need the Doctor to explain what happened in the last twenty-five minutes.”

“I *don’t* **understand**, Doctor,” Sarah Jane repeated, louder and slower, like an American addressing someone who didn’t speak English.

“Perfect.”

“I’ve twisted my ankle, Doctor.”

Another nod.

“This one just says ‘scream.’”

“You can skip that one. We’ve been getting too many complaints from the childcare center across the street.”

Sarah Jane blinked.

“You’re brilliant,” Elisabeth said. “Born to play the role. I could almost believe you are Sarah Jane.”

“I—”

“Pity we already have one.”

“Yes—what?”

She followed Elisabeth’s gaze to a woman emoting on stage. After a moment Sarah Jane said, “She’s a bit blonder and…bustier than I would have expected.”

Elisabeth shrugged, chagrined. “That’s the Director’s call. He says she’s ‘for the dads.’ But we’re happy to have you on board as an understudy.”

Sarah Jane sighed, then switched to reporter mode. “What’s going on with this play?”

Elisabeth considered for a moment. “You’ve heard of Sarah Jane Smith, right?”

“We’re acquainted,” Sarah Jane said coyly, in the manner one does under such circumstances.

“Okay, so you know that she’s done a great deal to help aliens living here on earth.”

Sarah Jane nodded.

“Nobody remembers who came up with the idea originally, but one night discussion turned to her. The next thing you knew the aliens had decided to put on a show as a way to honour her.”

“When you say ‘the aliens,’ that means…?”

“I’m human. There are a couple allies here in the Black Light who do what we can. Tell me about yourself.”

“Well…I’m actually Sarah Jane Smith herself.”

“That’s great! I admire your confidence! Are you going to stay in character the entire time?”

How does one answer this question? “I…suppose not. Call me Sam.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Sam. I’m Elisabeth. Call me Lis. I’m the stage manager around here these days.”

The women shook hands.

“Who wrote the script?” Sarah Jane asked.

“I don’t know his name. A friend

of the Director's. People usually call him 'The Author.'"

Sarah Jane was unfazed by this. She was accustomed to strange aliens who were only known by titles.

"We assume that Smith assisted him in some way, but no one really knows for sure."

Sarah Jane tried to think of who this Author could be, but she didn't have enough to go on. So, like a good reporter she set to work gathering clues.

A week passed, and Sarah Jane was no closer to an answer. Rehearsals were going as well as could be expected when nearly a third of the chorus vocalized at a pitch inaudible to the human ear, but they persevered. It cheered Sarah Jane to see how everyone pulled together. Lis was a kind soul; the performers were earnest and even the Director came across as a decent sort once one understood that he was motivated by a sincere desire to put on the best production he could.

Each chapter had an entirely different musical arrangement. She didn't care for the synthesized Tangerine Dream-style electronic score of the story the Author had titled *The Planet of Evil*, but she felt the orchestration for the one he called the *Hand of Fear* fit the story like a glove (if you'll pardon the pun) with its scything guitar riffs and funereal dirges straight out of a Bauhaus anthem.

AN EXPLOSION IN A QUARRY UNEARTHS A FOSSIL HAND!
THE DOCTOR STARTS TO WORRY THAT THIS ISN'T GOING TO PLAN!
SARAH JANE'S MIND IS CORRUPTED TRYING TO SAVE ELDRAD!
PANIC HAS ERUPTED—EVERYTHING IS MAD!

By keeping her ear to the ground, she learned that the Author kept his notes in the owner's office. She had misgivings about breaking in, but she couldn't ignore the possibility that the Author was exploiting or endangering the extraterrestrial underclass. Secondary to that was the concern that someone knew an awful lot about her life. She didn't know exactly how much the play detailed, because the Director only issued pages of the script to those performers in a given scene, but from what she had overheard in rehearsal it seemed the musical encompassed almost every adventure she had with that Doctor. It was unsettling to be so intimately known by a stranger. She was accustomed to danger, but this kind of vulnerability was different.

Sarah Jane was prepared to pick the lock on the office door, but she didn't need to. It was unlocked. She twisted the knob with her left hand and pushed gently on the door until she could squeeze through the opening.This was hardly the first time she had snuck into a place where she was unwanted, but most of her infiltration activities occurred after dark. However, the Black Light was most active after dark, so it made sense to sneak in during the day. Still, the room was in the middle of the building and it was fairly dark within, so she flicked on her torch and started shining it around the room.

The beam shone on a computer, a ZX Spectrum, unless Sarah Jane was very much mistaken. It felt strange seeing computers in modern times. She had of course seen all manner of computers during her time with the Doctor, but she still associated them with humans in the distant future or with vastly advanced alien societies. Still, she supposed she had better get accustomed to them. She was confident they would be widespread within her lifetime. Brendan might be able to help her, but it would feel odd to be tutored by a little boy. Alan and Christine's daughter was off at university learning computer programming. The girl might be able to help her learn once she returned.

Sarah Jane moved the torch and revealed more of the room. A desk, cluttered. A banker's light, a leather executive's chair, a painting of some ducks within a wooden frame, a fabric easy chair off in the corner of the room, a thin man seated on the chair, a wall safe, a potted plant, a fish bowl with a pirate chest and two goldfish. So far nothing unusual.

Sarah Jane returned the light of the torch to the thin man. The light reflected off his spectacles. He smiled.

"Hello, Sarah Jane."

Being caught in the act was an occupational hazard for a journalist. Despite that, she never stopped being the eight-year-old caught by Aunt Lavinia with hand in the cookie jar. Her first reaction was embarrassment, not fear. "I'm not Sarah Jane Smith. My name is Samantha J. Shire."

The man rose. His smile widened. "How…anagramatical of you."

Sarah Jane didn't say anything, so he spoke to fill the silence. "You didn't scream. I knew that line wasn't quite right." He drew a line through a word on his notebook.

"You're the Author?"

"More of a scriptwriter than an author, but that hardly has the same heft to it."

"Playwright?" Sarah Jane suggested.

The Author made an equivocating gesture with his hand. "A bit twee, innit?" He flicked the light switch on with his free hand.

Sarah Jane had a better view of him but couldn't decide if he was human or not. He looked a little bit like a light bulb, skinny body with a large, hairless head. He might be human-looking alien, or he might be an alien-looking human. She had seen stranger looking men in Brighton. She felt it would be rude to ask. Instead she said, "The subject matter is something of great interest to me."

"I would imagine so."

"Let's not fence. This musical is telling the story of my life!" She thought of the Cyber Leader's rap battle with the Doctor and added.

"More or less."

*CYBERLEADER: Our plan is **excellent**. This should be **evident**. There's no way to **circumvent** what we plan to **implement**. Your doom is **imminent**. Your fate you cannot **prevent**.*

*THE DOCTOR: If I may be so **bold**,*
*You've been **told***

*That you're gonna **fold***
*This spray of gold will leave you **cold***
*Don't you **titter, son***
*In fact, you'd **better run***
*Because the Doctor brought his…**Glittergun!***

"Yes, I realize that it is imperfect," the Author said, reaching into the fish bowl, scooping up a fish and popping it into his mouth, thereby answering the question of his humanity. "Would you be willing to serve as a consultant? There's an executive producer credit in it for you."

By the end of the week Sarah Jane had dropped the Samantha Shire identity with the crew, but they weren't quite ready to accept her as the inspiration for the character whose story they were telling.

"No, I really am Sarah Jane Smith," she insisted to Lis. "Ask me anything!"

Lis had been painting a backdrop, but she rested her brush on the paint can and thought for a moment. "Okay, there's something I've always wondered—"

Sarah Jane had seen that look before and forestalled the inevitable question by interrupting. "Anything not involving the date of the UNIT stories."

Lis closed her mouth. There was a long pause.

"Who emptied the garbage bins in the TARDIS? Did you take turns?"

During that night's rehearsal Sarah Jane decided to have another go at the Author. "I'd really like to know how you learned all this about me."

"You're a reporter. You know I can't reveal my sources."

Sarah Jane frowned. They'd had variations of this exchange dozens of times.

"Have you had a chance to review the script?" the Author asked.

In answer, Sarah Jane threw down a manuscript thick with sticky notes. "I can't stop you from going ahead with this farce, but at least I can make it as accurate a farce as possible."

The Author grimaced. "It's taken on a life of its own. Canceling it now would only draw more attention."

Sarah Jane gritted her teeth. He was probably right. They'd had variations of this exchange numerous times as well. She was helping, but she didn't like it. She had the awful feeling that after the premiere of the play she would be known as "Sarah Jane Smith, the Andy Pandy Enthusiast" forevermore.

"It would seem that you have a few suggestions for the script."

"Let's take them in sequence. The first story is the one with Linx. You call it *The Time Warrior*. That sounds like the title of a book about overcoming procrastination." If the Author noticed Sarah Jane's sarcasm, he gave no outward sign. Instead he said, "They're rehearsing that now."

"Can we watch? I have a few notes."

The Director maneuvered his players as if orchestrating the evacuation at Dunkirk. Sarah Jane and the Author lurked in the shadows of the wings and

spoke in hushed whispers. The blonde bombshell playing the part of Sarah Jane Smith, whom the real Sarah Jane had come to think of as "Stage Sarah Jane," shot the occasional glare in their direction, but mostly she over-acted and missed her cues.

"This scene coming up," Sarah Jane began.

"Where you meet the Doctor for the first time?"

"That's the one."

"What about it?"

On stage the Doctor, a sideburned silver fox stuffed into a Nehru jacket, tented his fingers and requested a cup of coffee from Stage Sarah Jane. Stage Sarah Jane flipped the table, sending the decanter careening towards the actual Sarah Jane in what was probably not an accident. "How DARE you, sir?! Just because I am a WOMAN does not mean I am HERE to make coffee for YOU or ANY MAN!"

The Author turned to Sarah Jane. "Is it that you prefer tea?"

Sarah Jane closed her eyes and counted to ten. "It's because while I call myself a feminist, I like to think I come across as somewhat less…strident in my pronouncements."

"It depends on who wrote a given episode."

"What?"

"Never mind. Here comes Linx! What do you think?"

Sarah Jane recognized the actor from some local advertisements. At 6'3" and with a leonine head of hair and Burt Reynolds Moustache, he was admirably equipped to portray a dashing leading man to sweep a leading lady of her feet in a period romance. He was less well suited to play a squat, bald Sontaran. "I think Linx should have kidnapped your casting director. When is he going to shave?"

"We're going to cover it with makeup. It worked for Cesar Romero. Oh, here comes his big musical number!"

Linx sang acapella for the rehearsal, but Sarah Jane knew that the music would swell for the actual performance. The actor was a very gifted tenor. It was a shame he was not putting his talents to better use.

Mom said if I ate potatoes
I'd turn into one.
So, I grabbed a fork and dug in,
Because that sure sounded fun.
I love to eat potatoes.
I love them all a bunch.
I'll eat them for snacks
and for breakfast and for lunch.
A hash brown turns my frown upside down!
I'm spoiled rotten by au gratin,
And I'm cryin' for O'Brian.
I would toil for one boiled!
I would DIE for shepherd's pie!
I love them raw, or baked or mashed
I love them most as crisps.

I'd do anything for potatoes
And to get them past my lips!
Potatoes!
Potatoes!!
POTATOES!!!

Sarah Jane grimaced. "I don't know how this myth about his love for potatoes got started, but it isn't true."

"But *Spud Love* is such a crowd pleaser!"

She fixed him with a level stare. "I find that extremely hard to believe."

He sighed. "So, cut the number?"

"Please. Or at least trim it. Fifty-seven verses are entirely too many. Half of them are just him…screaming the word potato?"

They progressed through *Invasion of the Dinosaurs*, which featured more singing than Sarah Jane recalled, but was otherwise reasonably accurate, particularly where the Doctor castigated the duped environmentalists with a peppy, upbeat solo.

Your Dino's not as cute as you think it is.
It's got terrible breath and arms like sticks.
You need to get out of the dino biz!
You've gotta get rid of that T-Rexxxx!

This was followed by her adventure on Exxilon. "I'm not entirely pleased with the Dalek costumes," the Author said. "They look fake and wobbly."

"Sometimes the real ones do, too," Sarah Jane replied.

The Author observed Sarah Jane frowning when they got to the Monster of Peladon.

"What is it now?"

"It's just that Alpha Centauri seems…"

"Yes?"

"The way that the costume appears…"

"Yes?"

"Well, she looks a bit…naughty."

"Ah. That. Relax. No one will notice."

Spoiler. Everyone noticed.

"We're almost there. We just need to finish the adventure on the planet of the speedos and then we can break for tea."

"I beg your pardon? Planet of the *speedos*?"

"Metebelis 3."

Sarah Jane laughed. "It's *spiders*."

"Is it?" The author flipped through his notebook. "Sloppy handwriting." He made a note in the margins. "Wendy! We're going to need a costume change!" Wendy was the part-time costumer and full-time science advisor. Sarah Jane wasn't certain why a play put on by amateurs in a bar needed a science advisor, but logic and this play had parted company quite some time ago.

Sarah Jane tried to sneak a peek, but he concealed the book. This explained some other oddities, such as why he was convinced that Lynx had kidnapped Professor Rubbish or that Harrison Chase employed a mercenary

named Scooby.

The spiders were played by humans, part time aerobics instructors wearing deely-bopper antennas with googly eyes affixed to their foreheads. Sarah Jane was reasonably certain that spiders didn't have antennae, but she had to pick her battles.

She did voice her concern about the regeneration scene.

"I don't like the wig," Sarah Jane said. "It's a cheap trick and insulting to the audience." The idea was that the actor playing the new Doctor would be dressed in the old Doctor's clothing. He would conceal his face, fall down and then remove the wig, revealing the transformation.

"We're not one of those Hollywood *Star Wars* productions," the Author said. "We're producing this show on a very tight budget."

Sarah Jane nodded and compromised. She was doing a lot of that lately. She thought back to what Aunt Lavinia had told her about the difference between compromising and being compromised and wondered which one this choice represented.

The group retired for tea. The cloth napkins were folded into flowers atop the plates, and the silver was arranged just so. Lis had laid out the meal with the same quiet precision she employed in managing the stage, then she had vanished into shadows, like a helpful spirit out of myth or domestically-minded ninja. Sarah Jane had the fleeting thought that this mix of competence and reticence would be poison to the woman's prospects. She was doing her job so well that she must seem invisible to anyone who might acknowledge her and reward her efforts.

Linx took a seat, but barely glanced at his latke. He would be feasting his eyes on Stage Sarah Jane for this meal. Stage Sarah Jane met his eyes and moistened her lips with her tongue.

Sarah Jane did her best to ignore their antics as she sat down next to The Author. Sarah Jane ate goldfish crackers. The Author ate actual goldfish. He opened his notebook and they began working through the next several segments.

"I call this one *Robot*."

"Sure. That's accurate, but not very evocative. But the real question is do you think we can get away with using '*Domo Arigato, Mr. Roboto*?' without paying a license fee?"

"I don't have much experience with your earth cultures, but it's my understanding that artists are happy to be paid in 'exposure,' and that's what we'll be giving them here."

Sarah Jane held her eyes shut for a period somewhat longer than a blink. "We'll come back to this one."

"Which brings us to the next issue. What do you think of our Harry Sullivan?"

If events continued on their current course, she suspected everything would change in the twenty-first century when alien integration would be increasingly common. Lexicographers and social scientists would have to work together to mint a new vocabulary to describe the phenomenon.

For now, Sarah Jane would have to make do with the language that existed now, and it was inadequate.

G'lob'nar was a mathematical construct of some sort. Or an eighth-dimensional representation of a square circle. Something metaphysical and abstract and unsuited to contemplation

by the mammalian brain, no matter how progressive the owner of that brain was. Something the Doctor would make her feel foolish for not understanding. Rather than the aliens she encountered with Doctor, who often looked like actors in cheap rubber masks, G'lob'nar was an *alien* alien, almost unimaginably different from any form of life on earth, and aeons and parsecs removed from human beings and their concerns.

As such, it was a poor choice to play plodding, conservative, square-jawed naval doctor Harry Sullivan.

Was there any way to address this incongruence without seeming xenophobic?

"Carry on, old thing," G'lob'nar said to the Author. "I'm only qualified to work on sailors."

"Top hole—old girl," he said to the fish. "Old thing. Old girl thing," he said to the fishbowl.

Sarah Jane smiled feebly and gave a thumbs up to the casting director. "Next up, *The Ark in Space*."

"Do you like the costumes? Wendy got a great deal on bubble wrap."

"Yes, they're fine."

"We have plenty of extra. Wendy made some of it into a dress."

"Great, "she said, then, "I like the choice of musical numbers. '*Come Sail Away.'* Very clever. You really like Styx, huh? I have the same concerns about litigation as before. Otherwise, it's a surprisingly accurate and respectful portrayal."

He nodded and flipped the page with one of his crazy spaghetti arms. *The Sontaran Experiment.* Looked like Linx and Stage Sarah Jane were performing their own experiment to determine how long they could lock lips before coming up for air.

She rose. "May I speak to you in private?" she asked, indicating his office.

Once they were inside, he said. "I feel that you may be displeased, but the changes I made, they were not arbitrary. Please, let me tell you a story first."

"Great," said Sarah Jane. "I'm a reporter. We love stories."

"Subscribers get more," said the Author, then, "Do you know Vidocq?" He leaned back in his chair and swallowed a goldfish.

"Eugène François Vidocq? Nineteenth Century Criminal turned detective and founder of the *Sûreté Nationale*?" She would never forget her time in the TARDIS with Eugène, of the whirlwind romance that had followed, and which culminated with a marriage proposal in the heart of the Horsehead Nebula a mere five hours after their desperate last-ditch stand defending the Library of Alexandria against the Quarks. Sarah Jane wasn't ready to settle down and Vidocq was so despondent after her rejection that he asked the Doctor to take him home. "Yes. I've heard of him."

"And of course, you know Honoré de Balzac." Sarah Jane nodded. She and the Doctor had delivered him from his imprisonment within the Oubliette of Possibilities within the Land of Fiction, so she could say she knew him as well. He promised to dedicate his next volume of *La Comédie Humaine* to her but became distracted by his correspondence before he could deliver.

"Do you know the story of their dinner party?"

Sarah Jane shook her head, *no*. She had in fact been present for the party,

but she wanted to see what kind of point the Author was making.

"The dinner was in Paris in the 1840s, at the court of the Citizen King, Louis Philippe." It had actually taken place in the villa of one Benjamin Appert, a royal courtier. Appert had been replaced by a Rutan agent, which is what had drawn the Doctor to the meeting in the first place.

The Author continued speaking, "Vidocq was already a well-respected public figure at the time, and de Balzac a famous novelist. Balzac was eating a peach when Vidocq said to him to him that he, Balzac, put a lot of work into writing fiction when there were true stories more fascinating that any story he could write. Balzac held up his peach and observed that the peaches that grow in the wild are unappetizing. They're small and sour, with no flesh on the fruit. It was only through generations of cultivation and constant refinement that we have come to grow peaches that are worth eating. He extended the metaphor to his stories, saying it was only through assiduous effort and careful pruning that the truth is revealed. He called himself a gardener of books."

Sarah Jane nodded. That was essentially how the scene had played out, though the Author could not have known that 501st division of the Sontaran army attacked at that moment, having infiltrated the party disguised as the caterers.

The Author leaned his long frame forward in the chair. "Do you take my point?"

Sarah Jane titled her head. "I'm sorry, there was a point?"

He steepled his fingers. "That was unkind. And yes. Reality is, in a word, unrealistic. We sometimes must…massage the facts, in service of a larger truth. Yes, it is true that Nyder was not a woman. But it's not important that he was a man, is it? The story would have played out the same way with a Nyda in place of a Nyder, yes?"

"Sure."

"Then you concede my point."

"No."

The Author huffed. "Why not?"

"Because it didn't happen this way!" Sarah Jane seized the script and read the stage directions. "NYDA enters the room. She is dressed in a tight black leather corset and high heels. DAVROS: Allow me to introduce Nyda, She-Wolf of the Scientific Elite. NYDA: (Cracks whip) Ve haff vays of makink you talk, Herr Dok-tor! (draws closer) This need not be unpleasant."

The Author mumbled something that ended with "…for the dads?"

"No, I'm putting my foot down over this."

The office door flew open, the knob smashing a hole in the wall. Sarah Jane tore out, her face thunder. "This is the last straw! I QUIT!"

Sarah Jane returned to Aunt Lavinia's house in Gloucestershire. She was ready to write off the entire production as a monumentally bad idea. To be more specific, she was ready to write off her involvement in the production as a monumentally bad idea, though it was safe to say that the production itself was one as well. It was a nesting doll of bad ideas.

She unlocked the door, removed the mail from the box, dropped her purse on a chair. She made a light

meal, took a nap and began to settle into a routine. By the time she heard a knock on the door five days later the play was receding into her distant memory.

Sarah Jane was not surprised to find Lis on the other side. The younger woman held a wicker basket full of food. "Sarah Jane! I prepared a welcome basket for you, but things got so hectic so quickly and you left in such a hurry that we never had the chance to give it to you."

Sarah Jane felt this was a rather flimsy pretext for a visit, but she let it slide. That cheese looked too good to pass up. She accepted the basket and said, "Please, won't you come inside?"

Lis entered and took a seat when it was offered. "So, this is the home of Doctor Lavinia Smith. What does a virologist do?"

Sarah Jane placed plates and silver and poured tea. "Mostly attends conferences in America. I suspect that someday I'll discover she's really a female James Bond and the virologist role is just a cover as she jets around the world and engages in derring-do."

Lis chuckled and sipped her tea. She picked up a bottle of wine from out of the basket. "Do you drink?"

"I sometimes enjoy a glass of dry white wine on my front porch, but I'm trying to cut back. One night I had so much that my robot dog wound up on my drystone wall, and I can't for the life of me remember how he got up there. He's been acting a bit odd since then.

A Disco Dog trundled in. Lis raised an eyebrow at this. Out of courtesy, she pretended not to notice when he got stuck on the carpet when attempting to back out of the room. Sarah Jane rose and helped dislodge him. The two women nibbled at the food, and the room was silent except for the sound of clinking china.

"These scones are very good," Lis remarked.

"Thank you. I used Lady Grey's secret recipe."

They were silent once more.

After a time, Sarah Jane asked, "Did the Author send you all the way out here just to talk to me?"

Lis shook her head. "I came out here on my own."

Sarah Jane rose suddenly. "Let's talk a walk outside."

Sarah Jane thought she heard Lis softly singing "Spud Love" ("My heart aches for potato pancakes, they're a winner after dinner!") as she locked the door behind them. The pair stepped into the forest surrounding the manor. Lis had heard that Sarah Jane sometimes had difficulty traversing gentle inclines, but the other woman navigated the rolling hills ably.

They walked in silence for a time, taking in the birdsongs and the humming, chirping, rustling sounds of the wood.

Lis spoke first. "Can I ask you for some advice?"

"Go ahead."

"I'm the stage manager. I'm good at it."

Sarah Jane nodded. She knew this.

"I'm too good at it. I want to act, but they won't put me on stage."

"You're too valuable to lose."

"Exactly."

"Perhaps you could become less valuable."

"I don't follow."

"One of my chores when I was a

little girl was to wash the dishes for my aunt. The sink was way up high, and I had to use a stool to reach it. One day, one of her dinner plates was particularly sudsy. I didn't have a good grip on it and I slipped off the stool and broke the plate. Aunt Lavinia didn't ask me to wash the dishes after that. If you're indispensable, then you're also unpromotable."

They continued in silence for several more minutes, then Lis asked her, "How are you adjusting to life on earth?"

Sarah Jane considered her answer. "It's peaceful. It's…mundane. It's real, I suppose in a way my travels around the cosmos weren't. I know what to expect. If I were still traveling with the Doctor, I would expect to find an ancient spaceship beneath the forest floor, or an alien masquerading as a creature out of folklore terrorizing the countryside. Now my troubles are limited to the occasional squabble with local covens."

"Covens?" Lis replied.

"They're such pests. Worse than bedbugs," Sarah Jane said, and sighed. "I needed this, I think. Have you ever seen a photograph of…I don't know, some huge piece of architecture, like the Sphinx or the Great Wall, all by itself?"

"Sure," answered Elisabeth, uncertain of where this was going.

Sarah Jane went on. "If there is no one in the picture, then there is no sense of scale. Your brain has no way to frame it. You don't know how it fits into your world. I think that's what was happening to me, at the end. I forgot who Sarah Jane was. The Doctor is magnificent, but he is overwhelming, in every sense of the word. His presence was blotting me out. So, perhaps this was the wisest way. I'm exiled on Earth, as the Doctor once was. I'm…enjoying it." She seemed to be trying to convince herself of the fact. "It's relaxing. But how can one forget—the glory?" She lowered her eyes and answered her own question. "One can't. One never can."

Sarah Jane bucked up and continued after a time. "So, I do what I can to help aliens here on earth. It's simple decency, as well as a way of honouring the Doctor, continuing his mission, and as long as we're being honest, it's a way of staying in touch with that larger world. Sometimes that means doing something unpleasant, like participating in the travesty you're putting on at the Black Light—"

Lis grimaced. "Is it really as bad as you're making it out?"

"Elisabeth, the Skarasen was a bus-sized bioweapon of the Zygons. The Author brought in the team that played the panto horse on *Rentaghost* to play it."

Lis had no answer for that.

"No one wants to be made to seem ridiculous. I certainly don't relish the possibility. But if this play makes the plight of the immigrant aliens here seem absurd, then people will take it less seriously, and I'm afraid it could put them at risk."

"Is there anything that could persuade you to come back?"

"I think if I knew where the Author was getting his information. He wasn't there himself, but he has some kind of access to a primary source. If I knew what he knew, I think I'd be able to push back."

Lis smiled broadly. "I think I can help you."

Lis reached inside her welcome basket and withdrew a sheaf of papers. Sarah Jane took one look at them and laughed out loud.

"Oh, Doctor!" she said, then after reading them "I think I'll have that wine after all."

The next day Sarah Jane returned to the Black Light with Lis. Armed with the papers, she knew exactly what he knew and had an answer for every one of his protestations.

"Where did you get photocopies of the Doctor's diary?" she asked the Author.

The Author suddenly looked very shifty, in the manner one does when one understands the jig is up. "I was shopping at an office supply store. I needed to make some photocopies for the Black Light Tavern. This was before the play, but we were still trying to get the word out to resident aliens. When I went to make a copy, I didn't realize that the last person to use the machine before me had left forgotten to pick up his copies!"

"And those were the pages from the diary!"

"Yes. And receipts for scarf detangler and a jumbo barrel of jelly babies, among other things. He really does have eclectic tastes."

Sarah Jane smiled. "You have no idea."

"So," the Author asked, in a painfully casual manner, "What does this mean for the production?"

"You can keep Nyda, but she's not going to be dancing with Davros. Also, their duet where you rhyme 'genocide' and 'by my side' is in monumentally poor taste, so you can forget about that."

"How about we switch it to minor key?"

"No."

The Author sighed. "That's palatable, I suppose. Anything else?"

"Those foam finger versions of the Hand of Eldrad will have to go. And the Brain of Morbius jello mold."

"But merchandising is where the real money is made!"

Sarah Jane stared at him until he lowered his eyes.

"All right. You win. Is that it?"

"That's it. I can live with everything else."

He clapped his hands and rose, looking very much like a merry scarecrow in that moment. "Ms. Smith, I feel good about this."

"As strange as it may seem, so do I. I think we have a winner on our hands."

It was the night of the premiere. The aliens were clad in their finest human suits, many of them dressed as minor celebrities. A make-believe Mister T. rubbed elbows with an imitation David Bowie and several Ogrons attempted to enter the tavern disguised as Duran Duran, but were recognized and turned away at the door

Stage Sarah Jane was bursting out of her dress, and Wendy wore her bubble wrap like a queen. Lis was almost invisible in her slim black number, but a wink to Sarah Jane showed she was all right.

Sarah Jane took a deep breath. If she could distill the lessons learned from her time with the Doctor into a single phrase, it would be that change was a part of life.

She could clarify it even further. It's not that change was a part of life;

it's that life *is* change. This was more literally true for the Doctor than it was for most, but it was a fact for everyone. To live is to change. She thought of a caterpillar, and how it is changed when it emerges from its cocoon and takes flight on wings that did not exist two weeks ago. She also thought about how caterpillars are sometimes changed by being eaten by birds or serving as incubators for baby wasps. She hoped that whatever her transformation would be, it would bring the right sort of change.

This play would change her life. She divided her life into periods of Before Doctor and After Doctor. Would she be entering a new stage of her life? Would events be separated by Before and After Play?

She thought of a passage from *Moby Dick*. "I know not all that may be coming, but be it what it will, I'll go to it laughing." She had traveled to the outer reaches of the Vortex, faced her greatest fears and borne witness to both the genesis of the Daleks and the final extinction of an alien god. She was Sarah Jane Smith. Whatever the future brought, she would meet it and be changed and emerge stronger than before.

Sometimes a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. Sometimes it travels through a pied flycatcher's digestive tract and is transformed into something less beautiful. And sometimes it gets to continue being a caterpillar for a little while longer.

The play was worse than a catastrophe. It was a flop, a bomb. It was not merely a flop, it was a "Is that a fish on the stage? —because the only thing I can hear is flop flop flop" level flop. (In point of fact, there *was* a fish on the stage, but he was so humiliated by the debacle that he returned to a quiet life as Mryka groomer in his undersea colony and never performed on stage again.) It ended its run that very night.

A pair of reviewers by the names of Grade and Powell wore out their respective thesauruses looking for synonyms for "catastrophic failure" and shared their gripes outside the entrance.

"Utterly unlikeable," said one, perhaps imagining a time some fifteen years in the future where could register his disgust throughout the world in mere minutes. "I thought it was so outdated. Horrible, awful."

"Absolutely God-awful, in fact," the other agreed. "It was just a little show for a few pointy head fans."

"Science fiction just isn't popular," they said together, and then being unable to find a taxi, left in a huff.

It's unclear if they even published their reviews, but even if they did they needn't have bothered savaging the play, as it was almost entirely forgotten within a fortnight, with two exceptions. The actor who portrayed Alpha Centauri was fined £200 for public lewdness and forced to burn the offending costume. Lynx's potato song *Spud Love* was sampled by the K.L.F. to produce *Potato Jam*, which reached number 4 on the UK Pop Singles Chart.

Lynx and Stage Sarah Jane eloped to some tropical paradise where they now manage a bed and breakfast. G'lob'nar found his calling and settled down to a career writing math problems for primary school textbooks. The Director went on to a more relaxing position as an emergency

room physician. Gleep Glop would eventually assume management of the Black Light Tavern when the current owner retired. The Author moved to Hollywood, where his "dry British sense of humour" was a big hit with the Yanks. He wrote for several sitcoms and does voice work on the side and still stops by the Black Light whenever he's in town.

Lis became phenomenally successful. Within six months, she was a celebrity, in two years a star and in five a superstar. She eventually became a Grand Dame of the stage and would serve as the inspiration for an entire generation of British thespians.

And Sarah Jane Smith? She remained Sarah Jane. She continued to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable with her investigations. The experience did not change her as much as it did refine her. She evolved and became more of what she always had been.

Although he loves earth and its humans, sometimes the Doctor gets discouraged with us. Not to put too fine a point on it, but human beings are awful. He wants to believe in the innate virtue of humanity, but it's not easy when most of the humans he meets are genocidal maniacs or shouty interstellar warlords. Even those of us who are not villains can be petty and cruel and mean to one another. We each have the potential to be virtuous, but it is a difficult path to walk and we so seldom follow it to the end.

But once in a great while, a human aspires, and reaches, and becomes the ideal the Doctor knows we can be.

When he is the black depths of depression and concludes that humans are not worth the belief he places in them, he thinks of Sarah Jane Smith and he goes on.

Little Girl Lost

Tina Marie DeLucia

'Victoria wore it. She traveled with me…for a time.'
'Well, as long as Albert didn't wear it.'

It was a beautiful dress. Not something Sarah Jane could see herself wearing more than once in a while. To a fancy-dress party, perhaps. And that was a big perhaps. Of course, it had certainly seen a lot of action; mummy aliens, gunpowder residue, grass stains, tumbling down into the apocalypse, and dust from pyramids that resided in outer space. But it was still stunning. Mostly. She didn't think of it too much after she left the TARDIS, aside from the occasional anecdote recounted to Harry or Sargent Benton.

In fact, it would have remained just that: a pretty dress from long ago. A sweetly made costume in the depths of the impossible wardrobe worn by Victoria so-and-so of the unknown once upon a time and space. Had it not been for the New World University fiasco of 1993, the day Sarah Jane Smith discovered that the woman at the center of it all was in fact, the same woman who had worn that dress.

Victoria Waterfield, a name Sarah Jane would not soon forget. Though she wished she could sometimes. That woman had brought monsters to Earth and offered up the minds of intelligent children as tribute. It wasn't intentional, nor for a pure purpose as she soon, herself, found out. But never the less what happened was thanks to her. But stopping it had also been thanks to her. Without Victoria's knowledge and assistance, perhaps the whole nasty web-work and mythical-creatures of winter would have overpowered the Brigadier and everyone else involved.

Victoria. Latin for Victory. It was also the name of about 8,000 British streets, 10,0000 pubs, one Underground line and, of course, one of England's most popular monarchs. It was more than common. In fact, if Sarah

Jane stepped out onto the street this very moment and called for 'Victoria!' half a dozen heads would turn. Victoria Waterfield could have been any other Victoria.

But she wasn't. She was the Doctor's Victoria.

She had to be. It was the only thing that made sense to Sarah Jane. How else could she have known all those things? Or act the way that she did, as well? But there was something about her too; something that Sarah Jane couldn't put her finger on but she was almost other-worldly—well traveled. But lost, she supposed. She seemed so very lost. As if the world was foreign and she was displaced. Sarah Jane remembered that feeling terribly well. Right after the Doctor dumped her off, it felt like she was a round peg in a square hole. It wore off as time went on for her. She supposed, now, she was lucky in that sense.

It was troubling, to say the least. Someone who had been with the Doctor, who had seen all the wonderful, terrible, beautiful things in the universe had been brought to—well, doing something so damaging and so horrible. Of course, there was nothing Sarah Jane could do about it now. The New World University had been built and had crumbled by Victoria's hands. And Victoria Waterfield had vanished after the battle was won. Like some sort of ghost.

A ghost that was haunting Sarah Jane Smith.

Every other night it was the same dream. She's wearing that dress but the face in the mirror wasn't hers at all. Large, sad blue eyes stared back wet with tears. An unfamiliar mouth was fixed in a frown; small hands gripped the pure white fabric of the gown. Victoria. Sarah Jane would try to look away but she'd still be there. Staring at her from every direction, trapped by her gaze. She was crying, the other woman's eyes almost accusing her. Sometimes Sarah Jane could almost hear her voice. Hating Sarah Jane for abandoning her and damning her. Blaming her for something.

But it always ended the same way; with her screaming so loud the mirror shattered.

It was happening on and off, more on-and-off than Sarah Jane would've liked to admit, but it was starting to become more bothersome than anything else. Victoria Waterfield was not Sarah Jane's first ghost, and she would not be her last. She just wished Victoria would find a new soul to haunt.

Little did Sarah Jane know that she wasn't the only one being visited by a tormented soul.

Former Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge Stewart was becoming too accustomed to strange visons of Miss Waterfield. Before the whole ruckus at that University or whatever it was, and now after it all she appeared with even more frequency.

She was there on the street as cars rushed by in Picadilly. She was standing at the edge of the park as he pushed little Gordy on the swings. And she was standing in the doorway of the Tube before the doors shut and the train rushed away. Alistair knew, of course, the Victoria woman wasn't actually there but…well, sometimes, it was far too realistic for comfort. Especially since she no longer was content to staying within his dreams.

There was something else about her too. Something that had bothered him

from the first time she entered his mind as that strange premonition: how familiar she was. Perhaps it was the eyes. So bright and so blue and so terribly worried, sad, and lost. He might be going slightly forgetful in his advancing age (not that he would admit it aloud, thank you very much) but those eyes were something he couldn't forget.

For once, the Brigadier decided to take a page from Miss Smith's book, and started to do what she did best: meddle and ask too many questions.

The name Victoria Waterfield appeared in very few places. With a last name as old-fashioned and posh as that, it was to be expected. There weren't many Waterfields rushing about the country. There were some sources that just talked about the university but there was no biography or bylineto speak of. Just 'Headed by Victoria Waterfield' and that's about it. A lot of them were transcripts for the New University's radio show—especially the last transmission where her deeds were called out to nationwide listeners.

Odder than that, was the fact that he couldn't find anything on record before 1968. That made even less sense. If she had been ten years younger than Sarah Jane, or even the same age as his Kate, surely there would've been some sort of birth certificate or a doctor's file for shots or the sniffles. But there was nothing. Not a thing.

Nothing about this woman made a lick of sense and it was terribly frustrating. Not to mention it only made her strange appearances more frequent.

He needed to know the truth, to fix the wrong doings of months ago before he truly went mad. But he certainly couldn't do it alone. And he knew just the person to call.

"You want me to what?" Sarah Jane exclaimed, causing Alistair to wince a little and draw the phone away from his ear.

"I want you to come over and help me find out more about this Victoria. If she truly traveled with the Doctor then—then perhaps we have more to discuss with her," he said calmly.

Sarah Jane scoffed a little. "Honestly, Brigadier—"

"Alistair."

"Sorry, Alistair. I've had quite enough of Victoria Waterfield, a lifetime's worth of her, and I would—in fact—be quite happy to never talk about her again."

He sighed. "…Please? I…I feel guilty about the whole affair, Sarah Jane. Call me soft, or call it a new grandfatherly instinct, but that woman needed help. Help that she didn't receive because we chose to walk away."

Sarah Jane was silent.

"You never know, we might need to investigate her a little and last I checked that was still your still your job description."

Sarah Jane reminded quiet for a long long moment. At last she replied, "Fine. I'll come over tomorrow, just give me a bit."

"Thank you, really."

"Don't mention it," she said dryly and hung up.

Alistair raised his eyebrows and placed the phone back on its cradle. It was a start, at least.

So three trains and a chatty cab ride

later Sarah Jane ended up at the door of the former Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart.

Over a cup of tea, brewed by a worried and perplexed Doris, Sarah Jane read out her findings from her little notebook

Oddly, in a historical achieve there was a Victoria Waterfield that had been born in the early 1850s. A probable coincidence. But experience had taught them long ago that the Doctor and coincidence often did not fall in the same sentence unless there was a 'there's no such thing' or 'that I landed here!' thrown in there as well.

Which was probably a lie. Half of the time.

Sarah Jane threw the notebook down on the coffee table and groaned. "It's like Victoria Waterfield had just appeared out of thin air in 1968. Did nothing for decades and then suddenly decided to make an evil university to make mind slaves out of teenagers in 1993. Casually, as one does!"

The Brigadier stroked his chin. "That's very strange. You know I did find something about a Victoria Waterfield, but it couldn't be the same woman. She would be over one hundred years old." He froze, and looked up at Sarah Jane with a flash of concern. "You don't think—"

"I don't know what I think," Sarah Jane threw up her hands. "I understand your concerns, Brigadier, I do. But no one has found not hide or hair of Miss Waterfield since the incident. The woman has simply disappeared."

The Brigadier found his Chamomile went down a bit harder than usual. "I still would like to find her. To apologize."

"Yes, I know that. But I don't think we can! Maybe she doesn't want to be found."

"Well, I want to find her!" Alistair suddenly snapped, his teacup hitting the saucer harder than he would have liked. "You were with her the longest. What else did she say? There must be some sort of clue."

Sarah Jane jolted a little but bit down on her lower lip. "I can't remember."

Alistair's face fell and he rubbed his face in his hands, suddenly feeling exhausted. "Wonderful."

Sarah Jane perked up. "Wait, she knew about the London Incident! She was involved! You were there, weren't you? Don't you remember?"

The Brigadier grumbled. "And as I keep telling you, that woman is in a fog to me. For one moment I'm sure I have her in my mind and then—nothing. Aside from those strange dreams. That all she is to me: strange dreams and smoke and mirrors. I'm not sure if you noticed, Sarah Jane, but I am getting on a bit."

"Oh no, you do not get blame old age for this one. You remembered some of it while we were in the thick of it. And afterwards too," Sarah Jane pointed out. "Just because you're feeling guilty—"

"And you don't?" Alistair asked coldly. "She's one of us, Miss Smith, and clearly she needed our help."

Sarah Jane's eyes slightly narrowed and eye-brow lightly raised—sputtering into her tea. "One of us? I wasn't aware that we were a club now. I must not have received my membership card."

"You know exactly what I mean. She knew the Doctor. She knows exactly how we've felt and we simply

left her. I know there were other pressing matters at hand. Aliens and Webs and the like." The Brigadier placed his saucer down on a side table. Standing proudly on it was a recent photograph of Alistair, Doris, and a blonde young woman holding a five year old boy. His daughter Kate and grandson, Gordy. Family just recently found. "But if you don't feel guilty about that, than I'm afraid you changed you into someone I'm not sure I recognize, Miss Smith."

"I know," Sarah Jane said, both exasperated and finally understanding. "We'll need to do this together."

Both of the Brigadier's eyebrows shot up to his receding hairline "We?"

"Yes. We," she looked up at him, looking less standoffish and a bit more tired. "We're both responsible for leaving her there so we're both going to find her, Because if you feel as bad as you say you do, I'm not just going to go off and find her for you. We're in this together."

The Brigadier sighed and with a creaking groan, stood up. "Very well Miss Smith, very well. I assume you have some sort of place to start?"

Sarah Jane grinned wickedly, for the first time in quite a long time. "Now, Brigadier, are you implying I've started prying into the affairs of Victoria Waterfield already?"

"No, Miss Smith, I'm implying that you've started prying into the affairs of Victoria Waterfield using UNIT's databases without asking any sort of permission," the Brigadier said flatly.

She grinned wider, and that's all the answer he needed.

He grumbled deeply. "Typical."

Victoria was alone again.

She was always alone, but somehow this was a lonelier type of loneliness. One she felt deep inside her. It was a terrible sort of ache. Oh, but it was much more than that. Guilt and shame was mixed in a horrible cocktail of the most painful emotions. But she deserved it. All those students, those children…she used them. She treated them like batteries. And for what? All those innocents lives for a cause that meant absolutely nothing. And even when she thought it meant something, it was all for something so selfish. How could she ever believe her father was really talking to her? It was almost laughable. Her dead father talking to her in her mind and in her dreams. Of all the stupid things to believe!

It was awful, pathetic even. She deserved everything awful in the world. The country ought to know that she was a horrid sham of a woman. She deserved to be abandoned and every awful thing that comes after that.

The journalist woman and Lethbridge-Stewart, they had left her there, at the University Complex. They had separated while fighting that horrid Intelligence. Once the dust had settled she saw them all walking away, victorious and happy without a single glance back.

They probably didn't even think of her. She didn't suppose she blamed them. After all the hurt and trouble, she'd want to forget someone like her too. So she simply went away, without a fuss, to the flat where she was just another Victoria on the apparent block's books. Victoria Harris. Back when she was still trying to try and reinvent herself, when she was trying to fit in to this brave new world.

Victoria stared at the mirror. She

did not recognize the woman there. This girl who was pretending to be so much older. Glasses that her governess would have worn perched on her nose, hair up in only the most professional of buns. A smart striped blazer and skirt that belonged to a school mistress.

It was a complete and utter stranger. Even though the hands of the woman would touch her face, and Victoria could feel it. Even though the woman would blink and Victoria's eyes would close for a second. Even though their mouths would move in synch, that woman was completely foreign to her.

Oh and how Victoria hated her, that woman in the mirror. She despised her with every single fiber of her being. She screamed at her, punched the glass unless the reflection shattered and her hand hurt—scraped up with glass shards. But the woman stayed, looking back at her, spider webs cracking across her face.

She screamed again, fingers pulling at the blazer, throwing it away. Nails ripped at the neat stockings and kicked away the sensible shoes. The glasses lay broken in two at her feet. Her palms furiously rubbed at her eyes. Her eyes now donned black eyes of mascara and liner. The back of her hand quickly wiped at her lips, leaving a smear of mauve on her bruised skin.

Her hands then tangled into her hair destroying the bun. She pulled, pulled, pulled at her hair, tearing at her scalp and ripping out small clumps of hair.

She mustn't be there. That woman mustn't be there when she looks in the mirror. She never wanted to see her again. Frantically looking around the bathroom, she threw bottles and creams this way and that. Victoria did find what she was looking for: the first aid kit. And inside was a pair of scissors. They were meant to be used for cutting bandages or cutting away clothes if there was a horrid injury. But she needed it for something more dire.

A fist grabbed a length of long brown hair, pulling it away from her head. Her right hand held the scissors, lingering by her head. The woman in the mirror did the same. "Go away. Go away!" she wailed. "The scissors snipped wildly through her locks. Down the clump of hair fell to the bathroom tile. Victoria stared at the fuzz lump, it looked so much like a yeti it made her eyes fill with tears.

But when she looked back into the mirror, the woman was vanishing. Warping. Changing. It was working.

She cut in an awful sort of frenzy. Slicing through hair at odd angles and different lengths. Over and over and over until the ends of her hair just went past her chin.

At last, Victoria no longer saw the stranger in the mirror. She saw instead a girl. With bright sad blue eyes, mangled brown hair. And the saddest look on her voice, frowning pink lips. All alone. Terribly lost. And terribly afraid.

Victoria Waterfield then burst into sobs, her arms wrapping around her thin frame as she collapsed onto her bathroom floor. Her cheek brushed up against the piles of hair, causing her to sob harder. She quaked against the tile.

Yes, the stranger in the mirror was dead. But in her place was a frightened Victorian girl without family or friends or a home to really return to. And she, perhaps, hated her even more.

* * *

"Miss Smith, are you trying to get us killed?" The Brigadier snarled through clenched teeth. His knuckles were gripping the seatbelt on his lap as if it was a lifeline to God almighty to save him from the manic driving of Sarah Jane Smith in a perpetual clown car.

Sarah Jane's teeth clenched tighter onto her pencil, the uncomfortable taste of lead getting worse as she turned the steering wheel of her Triumph Spitfire this way and that weaving through traffic.

"I am trying to get us there before it's too late!" she shouted. Well, more like she fumed through gritted teeth so the Brig had to read between the lines to fully comprehend. And even then he only got every other word.

"I'd rather get there in one piece!" the Brigadier barked back.

Sarah Jane rolled her eyes and swerved again. Midway through a roundabout. There wasn't any time to waste. She spat out her pencil; it landed somewhere on the car floor. "We have to get to the bottom of this. Victoria could up and vanish any day now and I'm not keen on looking for someone who doesn't want to be found. She could be up and on Jupiter if we didn't track her down soon!"

The Brigadier simply scoffed at the notion.

"I'm being serious," Sarah Jane protested. "Considering the last few days."

"And what makes you think she's still connected with this supposed maternal figure?" He asked, gritting his teeth as Sarah Jane went round the roundabout at top speed. He was sure they were going to flip over the way she was speeding.

Sarah Jane bit back a groan unsuccessfully. "Because it's the only solid human lead I've got, and if this lady knows even an inkling about Victoria than it's better than the looking at the same newspaper clippings talking about that rubbish University and expect it to tell me something new the seventeenth time I've read it!"

Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart, perhaps, finally got the hint that complaining about the manic driving of a manic journalist on a manic mission he himself set her on wasn't in his best interest. As well as he had really nothing to offer in the quest to find Miss Waterfield other than a strange dream and what resources UNIT could provide and the few articles he had found himself. And Sarah Jane had already scoured those archives quite thoroughly.

So the rest of the trip heard not a peep out of the Brigadier, in fact the only sounds were from a grumbling Sarah Jane complaining about English drivers (as though she were not one herself). Not a half an hour later, they had arrived at their destination

The housing complex had definitely seen better days. The houses were out of fashion, the few residents they passed were quite up there in age, and the concrete cracked as if it had finally given up. Sarah Jane carefully maneuvered her car throughout the odd complex, passing by spaced out and uniform houses before stopped at one in particular.

"This is the place," she said, gathering up her bag from the back of the car. She shoved her fallen pencil behind her ear and drew her small pocket-notebook out of her jacket. "I don't have to tell you to be on your best be-

havior, do I?"

The Brigadier scoffed. "Have you met the kettle, Miss Smith?"

The Brigadier lingered a few steps behind as Sarah Jane climbed the front porch. The door was a bright white. Sarah Jane took a deep breath, ignoring the tightness twisting in her chest. None of that now, she thought. She couldn't be feeling like this again; this was just another investigation. It had to be, for her sake. She knocked.

She had started fluttering through her notepad, checking what few notes she had. Her scribbled words jumping off the pages. 140 years old? London Incident. Gas company. With the Doctor? When?? Then the door creaked open. And a voice spoke.

"May I help you?"

"Sorry, does Mrs. Harris live here?" Sarah Jane looked up from her notebook, and met the eyes of an older woman. Her hair was a muted copper; it was probably brilliant and striking in her younger days, Sarah Jane thought. Her hair clearly hadn't realized that those younger days were over as the ends curled up in a flip that was unmistakably 60s both in style and in volume. But it suited her still fair features even if there were wrinkles around her eyes and cheeks. Like one of those aging Hollywood types.

"Yes, I'm Maggie Harris." Her voice was soft, and her grip on the door handle got tighter. "And just who are you?"

"Sarah Jane Smith, journalist. And this is my associate, former Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart." Sarah Jane said with a plastered on smile, holding out a hand that Maggie Harris did not take.

The Brigadier took off his cap and gave a respectful nod. "How do you do, Madame?"

"I phoned you earlier," Sarah Jane continued, imploring. "To talk about strange goings on from a few years ago?"

Maggie's cautious face turned pale and full of fury. "I already told you. If it's about that business with the oil rigs, I will not speak another word about it! My husband and I had enough grief from the government—"

"No! No, no," Sarah Jane said quickly. "We're not here about that, aren't we, Brigadier?"

The Brigadier seemed to have checked out for a moment, before quickly regaining his footing in the conversation. "Hmm? Oh yes, of course."

"Not!" Sarah Jane hissed.

"Yes, that what I meant. Not, of course not." He added with a wave of his hand, and a reassuring smile.

Mrs. Harris didn't seem to buy it. "Please leave me alone."

She started to close the door but Sarah Jane jammed her foot in the door before she could. "Please, Mrs. Harris," she begged, holding back a wince. "What I meant to say is that we're really here to talk about Victoria."

Mrs. Harris's eyes turned glassy, full of hope, full of fear. Her voice was wavering.

"V-Victoria?" For a minute she was quiet, her gaze a thousand yards away from that moment. "Please come in…"

The Brigadier took a deep breath , and huffed his way up the steps and into the home. After Sarah Jane.

It was certainly a retro looking place. Very white with molding and

certain pieces of furniture that Star Trek was surely missing. But Sarah Jane knew that the Euro Sea Gas refinery had made the homes for their employees the most up to date and, to coin a phrase, groovy as the time allowed. It certainly felt like walking into the TARDIS again. If the TARDIS had been designed in the swinging 60s…which Sarah Jane had to admit was a curious thing to think about.

But covering the walls were photographs in black and white and colour of a younger Maggie and her husband, Frank. A charming couple indeed, doing all the charming couple things. Buying a new car. On holiday by the beech. Their wedding. Dancing. Things like that. But the further they walked into the home; they found a third figure joining the couple in the photographs along the wall. A sweet, baby faced girl who couldn't have been more than sixteen—or so it appeared. It was like as the Harris' aged, the girl did so at half the speed.

"I must say she keeps looking more and more familiar…" the Brigadier muttered in so soft a tone that Sarah Jane wasn't sure if she imaged it or not. His eyebrows came together as if he was concentrating very hard to remember. But he didn't say anything else, he only looked sadder. But Sarah Jane made a mental note to ask him about it later.

There was no mistaking the fact that the big eyed, smiling girl was Victoria Waterfield: their Victoria Waterfield. Sarah was surprised by how happy she seemed. There, by the wedding photo, was Victoria in a pink gown with sparkly flower ornaments in her hair. Off to her first dance, with a nervous looking boy beside her. Under it, a graduation photo, with Frank Harris kissing the top of her head while she beamed holding a secondary school diploma. Up in the corner was Victoria at the wheel of a battered mini cooper with Maggie in the passenger seat wearing a helmet and gripping the dash for dear life. Happy memories and cherished times forever immortalized in ink and preserved behind glass.

The last photo Victoria was in had her sitting on the bed of what looking like a flat or dormitory, sporting a shorter haircut, smiling brightly with her hands on her hips, posing for the camera. The textbooks beside Victoria told Sarah Jane that this was to commemorate her starting University. But there wasn't another graduation picture to be seen.

"Please, sit down. I could make you some tea if you like." Maggie wrung her hands, looking as if she was about to burst at the seams.

Sarah Jane and the Brigadier sat down on a plastic covered sofa. He opened his mouth to respond when Sarah Jane answered for him. "We're alright, Mrs. Harris, why don't we just cut to the chase?" The journalist took her pencil from behind her ear, and pressed the lead to the blank notebook page, ignoring the harsh look that Alistair was sending her way.

Mrs. Harris nodded, and sat in an easy chair across from them, ankles crossed, and wringing hands now digging into her knees. She was biting her lip, like she wanted to say a million things they were all getting jumbled in her throat. So she was holding back. But she managed to untie her tongue.

Her voice came out shrill. "Is she alive? Please tell me at least that?"

Sarah Jane's eyes darted to meet

the Brig's for a brief moment. "Yes, Mrs. Harris," he answered, as kindly as he could manage. "She's alive and well enough. Have you not heard from her? At all?"

Mrs. Harris shook her head, tears in her eyes. "No…no we lost track of her when she decided to quit school. We couldn't understand it; she was so excited to go. And she was doing so well. She was writing us often and then she told us she was off to Tibet for some ungodly reason. We kept writing and writing, even when she didn't write back. When we started getting our letters back we just—well, we thought the worst." She covered her mouth with her hand, squinting to fight back tears, but it only made things worse. "My—my Frank, he keeps trying to find her. I told him it's a hopeless effort but he just refuses to give up. He keeps searching and searching. I'm so frightened it's going to be the death of him." The investigating pair went silent as Mrs. Harris composed herself. Their hearts sinking lower and lower into their stomachs.

"Is your husband—" Alistair began to ask but Mrs. Harris furiously shook her head.

"No. No, thank God. But he's in hospital right now. He broke his hip trying to scale one of those old pipes that used to go out to the rigs. He's grasping at straws, my poor Frank."

"Is it alright if we keep asking questions?" Sarah Jane said softly, abandoning her pencil and paper.

Alistair's hand reached out to cover the poor woman's.

Maggie Harris nodded, sniffling, now sitting on her hands. "Yes—yes I suppose."

The Brigadier cleared his throat and sat forward more to hold her hand more firmly. "Victoria wasn't your biological child, was she?

Mrs. Harris sighed. "No. We adopted her, Frank and I. After the business with the refinery."

"And what business was that exactly?" Sarah asked.

Mrs. Harris's sorrow turned dark, defensive almost. Back straightening against her chair. "You won't believe me."

The Brigadier controlled a smile. "Madame, I can assure you, nothing you can tell us will surprise us."

Mrs. Harris took a deep breath. "Well. Evil sentient mind controlling seaweed and foam over took the pipes and soon the rigs, driving me and others to do its bidding. And if Victoria hadn't screamed so loudly it wouldn't have ever been defeated because it hated loud-pitched noises," she said, matter-of-factly.

Sarah Jane blinked. "Well, that's new."

"And yet, still expected." The Brigadier muttered.

"Pardon?" Mrs. Harris gave her guests a bewildered look.

"Let me guess now," The Brigadier began, and not stopping for one moment to let Mrs. Harris interject. "A madman calling himself the Doctor came down from the heavens and with impossible tools and fits of intelligence that helped in this endeavor? Something to that effect?"

"Yes, but—"

The Brigadier waved her off. "He's an associate of ours. A friend, actually. He hasn't made an appearance in a few years but every so often, someone who's had a run in with him pops up."

Maggie Harris's expression was

one of a stunned woman. Sarah Jane could only imagine never being believed about the things that she saw that fateful day so many years ago. So to hear it all being discussed so casually was probably both a shock and a relief. And possibly a heart attack waiting to happen.

"Did you happen to meet him too?" the widow asked.

"Well yes. And no. We traveled with him," Sarah Jane said with a little shrug.

"Some of us longer than others," the Brigadier added.

Sarah Jane gave him a look right back, but after a moment focused her attention back on Mrs. Harris.

"Victoria was traveling with him too," Mrs. Harris explained "I don't know for how long though. But, I hope not too long. She was only fifteen when we met."

That made Sarah Jane's smile fall completely. "Pardon?"

"He wouldn't." Alistair stated flatly.

But oh yes, thought Sarah Jane. Oh yes he would. Fifteen was a teenager, still a kid! What on Earth was the Doctor doing traveling around with a girl who could have been in secondary school?

Mrs. Harris nodded somberly. "She was just a child. And there she was in the thick of it, being more capable then trained men twice her age. She saved us all really. Her scream was so…" She trailed off a bit, face desperately trying to hold back a wince. "…earsplitting. But it did the job. But whatever she saw out there, she didn't want any more of it. That's why the Doctor left her her with us. So she could be safe and have a family."

"Did she not have her parents somewhere waiting for her?" Sarah Jane asked, thinking about her Aunt Lavinia going a bit mad with worry when she rushed off for months on end, chasing frills and a scarf without so much as a by-your-leave or announcement of any kind.

"No, it's a bit sad actually," Mrs. Harris recalled, her hand moved to fold on her lap, her eyes darting up and to the side. "She told us once, that where she was from there was a wonderful queen in charge. So of course I said, 'Yes darling, Elizabeth the Second.' Well, she looked at me terribly confused. 'Oh no,' she had said. 'I mean Queen Victoria.'"

Mrs. Harris let out a weak little laugh. "It seemed so ridiculous at the time but after nearly dying from sentient seaweed I thought that a Victorian daughter was the least abnormal thing."

Sarah Jane looked down at her notepad. She hadn't jotted down a thing. What sort of journalist was she? Well, she couldn't be too hard on herself. The whole thing was enrapturing. The more she learned about Victoria Waterfield the more questions she had. What the hell caused her to drop out of school in the first place? What could have possibly been in Tibet that would have been of interest? And more important…where could she be now? Mrs. Harris had provided important clues, but the puzzle piece wasn't complete yet.

"Thank you, Mrs. Harris, for your time. I don't think I have anything else to ask right now. We will be in touch. And soon! I promise." Sarah Jane stood, and shoved the book into her jacket pocket. The Brigadier followed

suit, with a bit more difficulty.

Maggie stood too, and held out a hand. Sarah Jane took it for a shake but then the older woman's hands clasped over hers and gripped it tight, eyes now wide and desperate. "Please tell me if you find her. Tell her I miss her…please…"

Sarah Jane looked at the desperate woman in front of her. And nodded. As much as she tried to fight against it, a pang hit her heart and sent her stomach tumbling. So she gave Maggie Harris's trembling hands a squeeze. "I will. I promise."

Mrs. Harris managed a smile and let go of Sarah Jane, and lead her guest back towards the door.

As the Brigadier and Sarah Jane sat in her little car, cruising along the motorway now devoid of most traffic, no one had dared spoken a word. Until the Brigadier cleared his throat. "I feel sorry for her."

"Hm?" Sarah Jane's eyes never left the road. "Victoria or Mrs. Harris?"

"…Both of them."

"But I did have a thought, Sarah Jane. You've been looking for a Victoria Waterfield yes?"

Sarah Jane's eyes darted to the passenger seat for as long as she dared. "No Alistair. I've been trying to find Jack the Ripper and ask him round for tea."

"That's not what I—" He huffed and took a deep breath. "I meant, Miss Smith, that perhaps you've been searching for the right girl with the wrong name."

Sarah Jane's eyes shot open wide. "Do you mean—"

"—that perhaps our Miss Waterfield has been using Miss Harris instead," the Brigadier said with a proud little smile.

"Oh you are a genius!" Sarah Jane cried out, turning both her head and the wheel sharply to the left.

"SARAH JANE SMITH—THE ROAD!!"

Victoria had laid on her bathroom floor for a very long time. Hours, maybe even a whole day. She just barely noticed. But eventually she forced herself to rise from the floor, ignoring the splatter of blood, broken glass, and clubs of hair on the tile. She grabbed the first aid kit and stumbled to her kitchen.

Her fingers, still sliced and barely healed, throbbed with pain. Some wounds still were weeping sluggishly. And the pain didn't get any better when she stuck her hand under her water tap. She gasped sharply, and bit down on her lip to fight anymore tears from escaping. She had cried far too much today.

With her left hand, and much difficulty, Victoria attempted to put plasters on the wounds. Wincing every time she accidentally pressed too hard or her nail caught a loose flap of skin. It looked worse once she had finished. It made her ill. She couldn't even put on plasters right.

She could remember hurting her hand as a little girl. She had cut it on the fence that surrounded the garden and cried something awful among the violets and roses. Luckily her governess had been fetching her mother anyways and the two women had quickly rushed out the back door.

Her mother had quickly scooped her up in her arms, with words of comfort and love and promising that it would all be alright. What happened?

Why was her little faerie crying? Victoria tried her best not wail as she held out her cut palm to her mama. Her mother's face was so reassuring and sympathetic. A cut? Oh no, that would never do. And inside did Edith Waterfield carry the sniffling Victoria, and into her father's office. Her father too, was very concerned over her cut, and promised her they'd fix her right up.

Her mother set her on her papa's desk, and fumbled through a few drawers as her papa wiped away any stray tears, calling her a brave good girl. Her mama returned with a little roll of cloth bandages and told her to hold out her hand. Which, of course, Victoria did, still sniffling away. With her father stroking her hair, her mother set about wrapping her palm up in the bandages, telling her that it might hurt now, but soon all the hurting would go right away.

Her papa then kissed the back of her little hand, right on the cloth, and said that it would make all the bad things vanish. All the hurt feelings inside. Victoria recalled being astonished. Papa was right! All the pain was going away! And with a giggle and a kiss to both parents, she was off again to play.

It was such a nice memory. That sob she had been trying so hard to fight back gurgled past her lips in the most awful noise, and her body shook in her chair.

Victoria Harris was a far more common name than Victoria Waterfield, and usually Sarah Jane would be disheartened by that. But in this case it was a blessing rather than a curse. Sure she'd have to knock on doors and slip past landlords and receptionists to check registers but that's where the Brigadiers tried-and-tested charm came to play.

Down the list they went, starting in the seaside town that Mrs. Harris resided in. But there was only a handful of people there and surely Mrs. Harris or a neighbor would have noticed Victoria sneaking around. Then they went by process of elimination. Which was a task in itself. Central London. Unlikely, she might have been paranoid. Or the Great Whatever-It-Was might have told her not too. That did leave an interesting option. Would she live near where the New World University was located? There was just a chance. Foolish or perhaps that was what an all knowing elder god would want people to think.

So they scoured every rental, looked in every high rise, and canal boat. Even checking the rough sleepers. And after a painstaking search of every Tom, Dick, and Victoria Harris they eventually found her. A flat numbered 402 in a rather average apartment building in the middle of nowhere in particular. Sarah Jane wouldn't have been able to been able to find this needle in the proverbial haystack without knowing the name Victoria was staying under.

The arrow on the lift climbed slowly, to the cursive number 4. And the flat was a few steps down the corridor. Now or never, all this time playing detective had finally lead to this moment. No nervousness like there was with Mrs. Harris, they had a job to do. All they had to do was knock.

And so they did.

The door creaked open, and a thin woman seemed to just appear in the doorway. A badly bandaged right hand

was held to her chest. She was wearing a ruffled shirt that looked like it had been hastily pulled on and a long skirt. Her hair was an utter mess, like she had both just gotten out of bed and been given a haircut by Freddy Krueger while she slept. Blue eyes were bloodshot and glassy. But the pair could still recognize her anywhere and anywhen, but even Sarah Jane couldn't disguise the tentativeness in her voice.

"…Victoria?"

Victoria's eyes grew wide and she slammed the apartment door shut, nearly catching Sarah Jane's fingers in the process. "Go away!!" she screamed. "I don't want to see you!"

Sarah Jane spoke just loud enough to be heard "Victoria—Victoria, please, listen to us!"

"Miss Waterfield, please," Alistair begged, his voice so uncharacteristically desperate that it took even Sarah Jane by surprise. "This whole thing has been a terrible misunderstanding and—"

"NO! Why would I ever listen to you!? Stay away from me!" Victoria's fingers dug into her head, her eyes squeezing shut as she pushed her back up against the door; like a child mid-tantrum. No no no they couldn't be here. They shouldn't have found her.

Sarah Jane spoke again, a little louder. "Victoria, just let me talk. We want to apologize, please. That's all we're here for. I'm begging you."

No.

That was what she wanted to scream. No. She didn't want to hear whatever she had to say. Then why was her hand opening the door again? Victoria stared daggers at Sarah Jane and at the Brigadier, eyes becoming impossibly wide. "You—you both have five minutes before I scream murder and have this whole complex on this floor in seconds."

Sarah Jane nodded. "Yes, yes of course. Thank you." She wasn't keen on testing that threat. If it killed a seaweed monster it would certainly kill her eardrums.

Victoria shuffled backwards, and didn't open the door, leaving Alistair to awkwardly push it open himself and allow him and Sarah Jane to make their way inside.

The flat seemed so average. Nothing personal was really in it save for her own cooking ware and a calendar. It was stark almost. What one might see in one of those big catalogs as a show room. Victoria sat down in a kitchen chair stiffly, arms wrapped around her frame and looking at Sarah in a way that made the journalist gulp on instinct.

"…What is it then?" Victoria's voice was horse, strained almost. "You've found me, what is it you want to say?"

The Brigadier opened his mouth to speak but Sarah Jane step forward, "I wanted to say that I'm sorry, Victoria. The Brigadier and I realized it was wrong to leave you the way we did. We should have looked for you after everything had gone down, made sure you were safe, and that was our mistake. I wanted to make amends."

Victoria nearly wanted to laugh. Her face twisted into grimaced sort of smile. "You left me. You got your happy little ending and off you went into the sunset. I could have been dead for all you knew. "

Sarah Jane winced internally. "I know. And I'm sorry, Victoria. If I had known—"

"What? If you had known I'd traveled with the Doctor you would have shook my hand before walking away? Or you would have said it was all a fun romp and invite me to the pictures next weekend?" Victoria spat back, eye's flaring with unforgiven pain.

Sarah Jane could only stare back in response. There wasn't any easy way to fix this. Not in away sort of way. She had done horrible things, poor Victoria. So had Alistair. They had punished her for those things even though she tried to make penance. But was it enough? Was she really at fault? One thing at a time, she just had to go about this one thing at a time and surely everything would be alright.

"We were wrong. For doing what we did, Victoria. I'm not expected you to forgive me. But I wanted to at least tell you I was sorry. And If you'd let me, I want to be your friend." Her hand reached across the table, open palmed. "I know what it's like, I traveled with the Doctor too."

"So did I," Alistair finally spoke up, his voice was soft, comforting. A voice he so frequently used with little Gordy or with Doris in their tender moments. "My apology is not dependent on a mutual friend, but sympathy."

"You know nothing about what it was like for me. You think you do but you haven't the faintest idea of what I've been through!" Victoria stood up suddenly, her hands slamming onto the kitchen table. A wound in her hand didn't take too kindly to that, and the poorly applied plaster did little to halt the newly coursing blood.

"I know some things," Sarah Jane countered, refusing to back down, standing up too. "Not everything, but what I do know sounds awful. But you're not doing yourself any favors by keeping it inside, Victoria! That's probably how whatever it was got to you in the first place! You're feeling out of place and no one else in the world can understand that but us! Very very few people will ever know what it's like to be taken into time and space and placed back as easily as we were whisked off! And it's a lonely, lonely existence."

She held Victoria's forearm "But you aren't alone, Victoria. We weren't there for you then, but we can be here for you now. Let me be here for you! Let me help you. Please."

Both women breathed heavily in silence as Victoria searched Sarah Jane's eyes. It felt like an eternity until she wretched her arm out of Sarah Jane's grip and turned away. "Your five minutes are up. If you're still here when I turn around I shall scream."

Sarah Jane opened her mouth and then closed it again. Fine. She couldn't force this. She tried and failed. Like always. "Goodnight, Victoria," she said harshly. She turned and glared at Alistair. "There. We tried. Are you happy now?"

Alistair eyes searched Sarah Jane's and remained silent.

Sarah Jane shook her head and marched out the front door, not even bothering to shut it behind her.

Victoria didn't turn around. "I mean it, leave or else."

"I'll leave, Miss Waterfield." Alistair held up his hand and placed it inside his jacket's breast pocket, searching. He pulled out an old receipt and quickly jotted something down. He gently placed it on the kitchen table. "Sorry to bother you."

And as promised, he walked out the

door, and started to shut it behind him. Then she paused and turned back, Victoria still hadn't moved. "Mr. and Mrs. Harris miss you. They thought you were dead. I would recommend giving them a call. I think you owe them that." He shut the door with a soft click.

Victoria shuddered and turned back around, looking down at her hand and the bits of blood showing through the plasters. She'd have to go to hospital, she supposed. She looked for her keys a moment when her eyes fell upon the scrap of paper laying there so innocently. She picked it up and it read:

> *13 Bannerman Road. When You're Ready. L-S*

She quickly crumpled up the little paper and tossed it down on the table. She didn't need them. They didn't want to help her then, why would she believe them now?

And yet…

Victoria's eyes trailed to the phone on the far wall. It wasn't stable in her injured hand, but she held it as tight as she dared, dialing a number she had learned by heart by her sixteenth birthday. She held her breath as it rang, and rang. She nearly hung up it was pointless why would she—

"Hello?"

Victoria's intake of breath was sharp, and the voice at the other end said hello a few more times before she dared to speak. "M-Maggie? It's me. It's Victoria."

Sarah Jane was grumbling into her mug of tea, a blanket around her shoulder when the Brigadier placed a tray of biscuits on her lap.

"For goodness sake, Sarah Jane, it's been weeks. We tried. Our efforts were more than valiant. But Miss Waterfield has a right to vanish and never forgive us," the Brigadier said with a little sigh. "It's unfortunate but that's just how it must be right now."

"Oh it's not that," Sarah's arms moved quickly, causing the tea in her mug to slosh and land on the biscuits. She, however, didn't seem to notice. "She could curse my name to kingdom come for all I care. I know you wanted to help her, Alistair. She has so much pain inside her, it's so obvious. And the Decent Intellect or whatever it was saw that as a weakness, an entry point to her, and used it like a leech!"

"Maybe people like us can't be saved, Sarah Jane," the Brigadier said somberly, placing a kind hand on her knee. "Some of us, at least, don't leave the Doctor in a better state then he found us."

Sarah Jane shook her head. She didn't want to believe that for a moment. But it was hammering at her, it had been for days. Maggie Harris did say that Victoria had left him, not the other way around. She wanted off, and even that scared her. "I feel useless."

"Well, we can always check on the others, make them aware," the Brigadier suggested. "Miss Shaw, and that Chesterton couple, and not to mention Jo—you know, I really must introduce you two sometime—"

But Sarah Jane interjected. "She isn't a lost cause."

The Brigadier sighed and sat back in his chair, hands now resting on his stomach. "I know, Miss Smith, I know. But she is lost. In a way."

"How—"

Her thought was unfinished, as the

doorbell rang. Both looked up suspiciously.

"Mail, I suppose?"

Sarah Jane shook her head. "He usually just slips it through the letter box. You're not sending parcels to my front door to hide presents for Doris again, are you?"

"That was one time—"

The doorbell rang again, twice in quick succession. Someone was certainly impatient.

Sarah Jane gave the Brigadier a raised eyebrow and rose off her chair to go to her front door. She peered through the peephole only to see the top of someone's head. Someone short, it seems. Maybe one of the neighborhood kids?

She opened the door slowly, and nearly slammed it again in shock, but she managed to stop herself. "V-Victoria?"

Victoria shuffled a little, but smiled softly. More nervously, actually. "Hello, Sarah Jane. Is it—is it alright if I came in?"

Sarah Jane blinked and shook herself back to attention. "Yes, yes of course, come in." She stepped aside and Victoria stepped in. She certainly looked better than before. Not great, but better. Her mangled hair had been cut into a sort of bob, but enough volume was there so she didn't look like a second-rate flapper. There was a reddish tint to it too that Sarah Jane wasn't sure was there before. Her outfit was put together enough: sensible slacks and a purple blouse with billowing sleeves that didn't look like she was swimming in them.

She still looked terribly young, but that was the pain of a round face, she supposed. But dare she say it, Sarah Jane thought she actually looked her age. And her right hand now had proper, medical looking bandaged wrapped around each finger and palm with care.

"I'm not bothering you, am I?" Victoria asked, her voice soft as a mouse.

"No, not at all!" Sarah Jane said quickly. "It's just me and the Brigadier, we weren't really doing anything."

"Nothing at all," called the Brigadier from the sitting room. He was standing now, tea in hand. "Hello, Miss Waterfield."

Victoria nodded politely. "Mr. Lethbridge-Stewart. It's…lovely to see you again."

"Ah, yes. I suppose so," He nodded but it certainly didn't match his tone of voice. He sounded uneasy.

"…I-I meant from when I properly saw you last. In the underground? It seems so long ago," Victoria looked a bit bashful at that. And it only got worse as she hesitantly followed Sarah Jane into her home.

The Brigadier looked puzzled. "The underground? I'm sorry, I haven't got the faintest…" He trailed off, eyes growing wider and shinning with some sort of recognition. "With Benton, and that Anne girl."

Victoria nodded, smile still uneasy. "I suppose the…the you-know-what made you forget a bit. It was more convenient for it that you not remember some things."

"I suppose so, Miss Waterfield, I suppose so," the Brigadier sat down very slowly, still bewildered as several broken pieces of memory slowly sewed themselves back together.

Before he was off down memory lane, he smiled at Victoria. "I'm so

very glad to see you. I was starting to think I'd never see you again."

Victoria grew quieter, and her gaze dropped to her lap. "I didn't think I'd be here either. But…I was just so tired of being alone. Of being lost. Oh I said some terrible things to you, Sarah Jane. And I was so so rude to you, Mr Lethbridge-Stewart! You were only trying to help! I was upset and—"

Sarah Jane quickly covered Victoria's hand with her hand, silencing the wide eyed girl. "It's all right. You're here now. No need to apologize."

Victoria nodded, and satisfied Sarah Jane pulled her hand away.

"We should be apologizing," The Brigadier said, no longer in his own head. "You had tried to fix your mistakes and realized you were in the wrong and we still treated you poorly."

"No—I'm sorry!" Victoria exclaimed.

"Now, really, Miss Waterfield—"

Sarah clanked her teaspoon against her mug, silencing the other two. "Now that's quite enough of that, we'll be here all day."

"…Really, I did want to…explain things. There's never been anyone to talk to. Or at least, I didn't think there was. Maggie and Frank did their best, but how they couldn't understand fully. I didn't burden them with everything that happened to me."

Victoria drew her knees to her chest, and looked so very much like the teenager in those beloved photographs that lined Maggie and Frank Harris's walls. "There were…so many awful things that I saw while traveling. So many awful things that happened. I just wanted to forget. I wanted to move on. But, it didn't go away."

"Painful memories are often like that," the Brigadier said with the utmost sympathy.

"Well, yes…" Victoria said. "But they literally didn't go away. Before we met Mr. Lethbridge-Stewart, the Doctor, Jamie and I had encountered that awful thing before. And it had been inside my head. It tried to control me. The Doctor thought after we beat it, that it wouldn't bother me anymore. But it was always there. Lingering in my mind. Waiting. Tormenting me the moment the Doctor wasn't there to fix it."

Her fingers slid up to her temples, as if the echoes of that dastardly voice still lingered, even now. "It said it was my Papa, and that he was hurt. He needed me, he needed my help and that we could be together again." Her lower lip wobbled. "I missed him too much, I wanted to believe it was him, that all those strange things had happened, why wouldn't Papa be alive? But…it wasn't true. None of it was." Tears sprung to her eyes, and she buried her face in her hands. "I spent fifteen years trying to make a lie come true."

Sarah Jane slid off her sofa, and stood in front of Victoria taking her hands away from her face, holding them. "You can't change what happened, Victoria," she said softly. "I wish we could. I wish we could stop all the pain from happening to you, but we can't. But we can be here for you now. These things won't stop hurting so easily, and maybe they never will. Hurtful things will always happen. It's what makes us human and makes life worth living sometimes. Forgetting pain won't be better, it makes the hurt worse. And trying to ignore it won't be much better."

Sarah Jane's face looked a bit stony. "I know what it's like to be abandoned, Victoria. It's probably the worst I've ever felt in my life. I know, and I am so, so sorry I did the same thing to you."

Victoria's eyes were wide, almost in disbelief. "Really?"

"And I'm no stranger to horror, Victoria," Alistair added. His mouth was in a tight line. "In my line of work, you have no time to mourn the good men you lose. You simply stiff upper lip and carry on and put up a good front. But no front is impenetrable."

Sarah Jane's eyes were wide and glassy. She and the Brigadier had had those long painful talks before, but he never opened up like this. He wasn't the sort. He rather listen to her, sort her out, and never mind himself. But really, he was just as lost as the rest of them.

He continued, eyes closed a moment. "Sometimes it's close to drowning, I believe. You're stuck. You ache inside but to open your mouth will let the water swallow you whole and destroy you faster. No one understands, because we're all drowning in our oceans." He blinked. And quickly cleared his throat, pushing away that softness for a moment and patted the Victorian girl's other knee. "But in our case, we can all hang on together and keep above water."

Victoria's hands gripped Sarah Jane's tightly. Her voice no stronger than a whisper. "I don't deserve this. This kindness. You owe me nothing."

"We owe you everything," Alistair insisted.

Sarah Jane nodded "People were there for me. Even when I wouldn't let the Doctor go. You were me, you were the Brigadier, all of us—without the proper people around you to help. You were forgotten. You even forgot yourself. But here you are!" Sarah Jane smiled brightly.

"You're not a lost little girl, Victoria, as hard as it is to believe."

Sarah Jane's eyebrows were raised. "You know Alistair, sometimes you astound me."

"I think I astound more with age." he chucked and stood, clasping a hand onto Victoria's shoulder. "We are a motley crew, Miss Waterfield. And by no means any sort of professional help, though I think Sullivan could help with that, but we can manage to be good listeners. Perhaps, for a start, we can be enough."

"It's a start, of course," Sarah Jane agreed.

Victoria's tears slowly fell down her far too pale cheeks, but there was a small smile on her face. "It's better than before."

Sarah Jane smiled back, and glanced down at Victoria's now properly bandaged hand, and gently tapped it with her right index finger. "First things first, making sure that doesn't hurt anymore."

Victoria nodded, smiling growing, and before she knew it her fellow time travelers helped her to her feet.

The Brigadier then enveloped the Victorian girl in a tight hug, not letting go even when Victoria's sobs got harder. They were good tears, for once.

"N-No one's hugged me in fifteen years." She cried, muffled in his shoulder gripping on his jacket for dear life.

The Brigadier blinked rapidly,

fighting back his own tears and clearly his throat. “Oh, don’t tell the rest of the group that. They love group hugs too much.”

“Rest of the group?” Victoria pulled back only to turn her head and looked at Sarah Jane.

“We said you weren’t going to be alone,” Sarah Jane hugged Victoria too. We’re all a bit broken and more than a bit strange, I’m afraid.”

Victoria laughed softly in Sarah Jane’s ear. No, it wouldn’t be easy. She had a lot to make up for, and yet… “I’m sure we’ll all fit together wonderfully.”

The Interstellar & The Improbable

Scarlett Ward

There was something unspeakably uncanny about an empty tube station. There was usually no such thing—even just before closing time there'd be drunk stragglers and staff. London was defined by its busyness, its hordes of commuters, fun-seekers, tourists, and theatre-goers, and its underground even more so. To see it empty gave the impression of a ghost city.

This one had been divorced of its purpose for a long time; the walls advertised shows long gone and wartime ads encouraged growing fruit and rationing for the good of the country. It would have felt like a different kind of time travel, walking in the remains of another era, except she reminded herself that most of them had to be modern fakes from film crews. The dates didn't match.

Not a bad place to plan an invasion from, Sarah Jane thought. It was also a great place to murder witnesses in, she had to admit, but what was life without a little risk?

She froze at the unmistakable sound of footsteps behind her. "Who's there?" she asked, and there was no answer but an echoing silence. She turned and walked towards the source of the noise, refusing to be anything but annoyed. "I know you're here, I heard you."

There was movement from the corner and she moved her torch, catching someone in its beam. Before they shielded their face, their eyes flashed the light back like a cat's pupils, and Sarah Jane lowered the beam, torn between believing it was a trick of the light, the product of a mind always searching for the extra-terrestrial, or the truth. "What are you doing here? Were you following me?"

"I could ask you the same thing," said the stranger. She had blonde hair and the kind of haughtiness Sarah Jane associated with Oxbridge graduates—journalism was full of them. "You looked like you were sneaking in."

"Mistress. There is still an obsta-

cle," a voice said from around the corner, all too familiar. She sighed and walked back, while Sarah Jane followed with barely contained excitement.

A knee-high robot was indeed waiting around the corner—there was nothing obstructing him, his complaint presumably about the generally uneven terrain. His tail wagged and his, "Mistress," seemed to be directed at them both.

"You know her?"

"Affirmative. Mistress Sarah Jane has an inferior unit."

Sarah Jane frowned, the comment hitting too close to home—her own model had been slowing down for years, slowly consumed by circuitry faults she hadn't the skill to fix.

"Oh, ignore him, he's been like that ever since he started receiving communications from another one of them about the glamour of the Capitol, and he won't believe me when I tell him it's actually the most boring place in the Universe." She smiled, and Sarah Jane's reservations faded. "I'm Romana and I can only assume you also travelled with the Doctor."

Sarah Jane offered her hand, cautiously hopeful. It *was* the most interesting thing that had happened to her in a while. "Sarah Jane Smith. He had wild hair and a ridiculous scarf last time I saw him, but I know he's probably a completely different person by now."

Romana shook it, looking bemused by the gesture. "Probably, but he was the same when I left him. Why *are* you here?"

"Same reason as you, I expect."

"I'm here because of you, actually—I was following some traces of artron energy that he picked up."

"You *were* following me."

"Yes, but not for nefarious purposes. And your reasons?"

"There's a ghost tour that goes down here and it's bizarrely popular. More damningly, the people I know who've been on it are…different. They don't care about the things they used to anymore, and all they want to do is sell you tickets. It's either aliens or a very strange pyramid scheme."

"I'll hold out for aliens, since we'd hardly be able to do much about the latter."

"Oh, it'd still make a good article. I'm an investigative journalist now, I get to turn nosiness into a career." She hesitated, wanting to know how other people coped with the strangeness of a life after the Doctor. "What do you do for a day job?"

"I'm a wanderer in eternity," Romana said airily.

"Right." Said Sarah Jane, raising an eyebrow. "I'm not being funny, but are you? An alien?"

She nodded, distracted as she peered round the next corridor. "Gallifreyan, if that's relevant." She stiffened suddenly, eyes going wide.

"What is it?"

"Nothing." Romana blinked. "I just had the queerest feeling. Like…there were hundreds of minds near me, but only for a moment."

"You'd better not be seeing ghosts."

"I'm a *scientist*," she said, offended. "I don't believe in anything *wishy-washy*, I just happen to be telepathic."

A sign proclaiming 'these stairs are equivalent to a 15-storey building, before attempting to climb them please make sure you are fit and capable to

do so' distracted Sarah Jane from replying. Since the lifts were long since out of service, there was little choice but to take the challenge, and her attention remained on the climb rather than conversation, until, a few floors in, Romana winced, reaching out to support herself against the banister.

"Are you okay?"

Romana nodded. She had the robot in her arms, which was likely half the problem, and his antennae extended, scanning her before coming to the obvious conclusion. "Mistress, you are showing signs of physical exertion, suggest ceasing activity until recovered."

"I'm fine."

"He's usually right," said Sarah Jane, though she could already tell she wasn't going to listen to either of them. "At least let me carry him."

"I'm *fine*," she insisted, "I just need to go a bit slower."

They fell into silence, Sarah Jane matching her pace. *I left him*, Romana had said. Perhaps it was just a matter of semantics. Perhaps it wasn't. How could anyone leave that life by choice? That excitement? Romana must have had something better than commutes and day jobs and taxes to return to.

"I have some complaints about your people, you know," she said, in an effort to make conversation.

"Doesn't everyone? Doesn't make me popular in space bars, let me tell you; I could write a thesis on Monan insults by now." Romana glanced at her, curious. "Considering you've spent time with one of the most bearable of our species, what is it you object to?"

"Oh, the Doctor's a people all of his own," Sarah Jane said, and was struck by how true that felt. "I'm stuck on Earth because your people wouldn't let humans in."

"They're like that." She nodded. "I left to get away from them. Well, there were some time-travelling lions too. A chance to have my own adventures, it felt like the right time."

She nodded, as if that was relatable. Was there ever a right time? Would there have ever been a point when she'd have thought of her own accord, right, time to go be a real adult now, and put away childish things like robot dogs and scarves long enough to trip over?

Or was it just different for Romana, since she'd been born thinking space and time was her birth-right, while she'd just been *lucky*, so lucky, to be one of the only humans of the century to see the stars. Oughtn't she be satisfied with what she'd gotten, enough to gratefully go onto a normal, mundane life?

Sarah Jane looked away, hating the envy creeping into her bones.

They reached the top, finding a small string of people waiting around—the next group for the tour. They shared a look and she forgave Romana for her less than dazzling people skills, since they clearly had identical intentions.

Romana knelt, quickly giving her robot hushed instructions to stay out of sight, before they snuck round, joining the back of the queue.

Sarah Jane glanced around the party, trying to get a measure of them, while Romana fiddled with pieces of tech, trying to scan them without drawing attention. "Exciting, isn't it?" she asked a short man next to her.

His nod wasn't very convincing.

"Brilliant."

"I'm Sarah Jane Smith," she said, getting out her notepad. "I'm writing an article about ghost tours for the *Observer*, could I talk to you about your experience?"

"Um, sure? I guess I'm here to cure my phobia. Desensitisation, you know?"

"You're scared of horror?"

"Yeah. It's real bad at Halloween." He nodded. "Can't ever watch a horror movie." He shivered as they descended into the darkened tunnel, repeating to himself, "I don't believe in ghosts, I don't believe in ghosts, I don't believe in ghosts."

"And quite right too," said Romana, who had suddenly popped up behind them. "Even if, to play devil's advocate, they did, don't you think they'd have better things to do than hide out underground just to mess with people? It's nonsense. When you're dead, you're dead, you don't get another shot at it."

"Unless you're a Time Lord," Sarah Jane muttered under her breath.

"Well, *that's* different."

When they reached the abandoned station platform, she tried not to make it too obvious as they broke away from the group, while the guide started talking about the Blitz and how the station had been used as a bomb shelter, with a warning to look out for the rumoured ghosts of war-time casualties. Standard fare, for a touristy ghost hunt—the tour guide was decent, but no master of theatricality.

"Everyone's human," said Romana. "All the customers, anyway, I'm not sure about the guide. You said you had friends who acted oddly after the tour, what exactly did they do?"

"It was a colleague of mine. She was worried about her partner—he'd suddenly become distant after the tour, she was worried it had been a front for meeting someone else, but then she went on it and didn't seem to remember any of her worries. She only cared about getting everyone she'd ever talked to on the tour, and soon all the freelance journalists I knew were covering it."

"They couldn't have been paid off for good reviews?"

"They're not the kind. And it wasn't just a pattern of good reviews, it was an echo chamber of praise. It's hard to get people to agree at the best of times, a gaggle of opinionated journalists all writing like that?"

"You're thinking mind control." Romana nodded. "Not a bad theory. If that happens *here*, though, does that mean people really pay money to see an old train?"

Sarah Jane smiled. "I don't see the appeal myself, but some people's hobbies revolve entirely around those things. Do you have trains on Gallifrey?"

She shook her head. "First time I travelled on one was Paris, 1979." She wrinkled her nose. "Fun, as a novelty, but somewhere between Time Rings and Vortex Manipulators as far as comfort goes, in the long term."

"You're not stuck here then? You have a ship?"

"My ship is…a work in progress, but I've almost perfected a homemade Time Ring. If I *really* needed to get off-planet, as long as I can build a transmitter, I could get the CIA to come and arrest me." She shrugged. "Not the most appealing of fall-backs, but if needs must."

"Ah," Sarah Jane said, slowly, not with bitterness, just wistfulness. She wouldn't begrudge Romana her freedom. "It really wasn't an ending for you, was it?"

Romana blinked, surprised. "It doesn't have to be for you, you know. The rest of your life might be no more consequential than the beating of a flutterwing's wings to us, but a flutterwing only survives for one cycle of the moons, to it a century might as well be immortality. Time is relative."

"*Thanks*," Sarah Jane said, raising an eyebrow. "I'm aware I have a longer lifespan than a moth. Are Gallifreyans born patronising, or do you have to go to school for it?"

She had the grace to look sheepish. "I got a triple first in that too."

Sarah Jane shook her head as they re-joined the group but couldn't help but laugh. In her experience of Time Lords, they were somehow capable of being both unbearable and likeable at the same time, but it was fitting that they'd be walking paradoxes.

"We're coming up to the jewel of the tour," announced the guide. "I'm afraid we can't all go in at once, due to space issues, but everyone so far agrees it's worth the wait!"

They followed, tense, as the guide continued, "The tunnels up ahead weren't completed even when the station was open. Some say that was because there was an accident during construction, and many have reported hearing their screams."

"They've the perfect excuse for suspicious noises," Romana remarked. "How very reassuring."

The guide stopped at the tunnel's entrance. "Who would like to go first?"

A murmur ran through the group, but before Sarah Jane or Romana could volunteer, the guide's focus turned on the ghost-phobic man. "Would you like to start us off, sir?"

He nodded—she could only imagine the poor man was bowing to the social pressure—and headed off, looking like he was having serious second thoughts about the whole idea of facing his fears. They were both tense as they waited for his return, and Sarah Jane jumped in front of him as soon as he did, as inconspicuously as possible in such tight quarters.

"Hello, it's me from the *Observer* again. Can I ask what you've thought of the experience so far?"

"Oh, sure. I loved it! Best thing I've done all week. Month, even."

"You like ghosts?"

There must have been something sceptical in her tone, because he blinked, and his stare was one of a man thinking too quickly. "Oh yeah, I was scared before, but I guess the desensitisation worked. I'm cured!"

Sarah Jane scribbled down the quote, thanked him, and turned to Romana, grim-faced.

"What very effective therapy," muttered Romana. "Are they hiding therapists in there?"

"I wish. Let's volunteer for the next group?"

Romana shook her head. "I'll go. It doesn't make sense for both of us to walk in to a trap."

Sarah Jane frowned, starting to suspect she was being side-lined in her own investigation. "Hang on, I'm not here for moral support. If that's what you think, you might as well have left me with the robot!"

"I'm not asking you to wait outside

and stay safe, I'm asking you to be my backup. It's a matter of biology—whatever this is, I can only assume there's some psychic component, and I have a chance of fighting that off. When I come out, make sure it's me. If it's not," she paused, "…well, I'm sure you'll figure something out, you seem resourceful."

"I hardly know you." Sarah Jane protested. "We've *just* met."

"Then we had better hope I'm very distinctive," Romana said cheerfully, frustrating cavalier about the whole thing.

After a few minutes of waiting, a faint scream, and another all-too-happy customer returning, Sarah Jane watched Romana disappear into the tunnel, trying to ignore the foreboding gnawing at her stomach.

Romana held back a shiver as she walked down the tunnel alone. It wasn't merely empty like the others, this one was something raw and untouched, its fittings unfinished, floor unlaid. Space had been carved out, but that was as far as they'd gotten. It was the underground reduced to its bones.

She narrowed her eyes, trying to see better through the gloom. It reminded her of someplace, but it was an old, wispy memory, just out of conscious reach. Perhaps she'd just been in too many ominous tunnels and quarries to remember them properly—really, once you'd seen one, you'd seen them all.

The tunnel ended in a door that shouldn't have been there, simple and wooden. Romana regarded it for a moment, but it remained stubbornly opaque, and she admitted to herself that she couldn't divine the nature of the trap without walking into it. Traps did tend to be like that—the good ones, anyway.

Romana stepped inside. She'd been expecting *something*, so it wasn't a shock when someone grabbed her arms, but it did still throw her off-kilter. She struggled, mostly to keep up the act, her attention focused on working out what was going on.

The room was long and narrow, with no end in sight—once intended for trains, she had no doubt, but its creators had never gotten around to laying tracks, leaving it abandoned and purposeless, until now. Several metres away was a large crystal orb and a man stood behind it, watching their approach with an entirely blank expression.

The crystal soon took up all her focus—it was unusually large, but not remarkable in itself, except for its presence. To say it had a psychic presence would be a terrible understatement—if a single sentient mind was a lightbulb to her, this was an exploding star, echoing with thousands of different voices.

Just being near it was giving her a headache, her mind building its shields higher and higher to block out the cacophony. She tried to pull away, this time in earnest. "In the name of intergalactic law, I demand that you stop!"

No one bothered to give her answers, or felt need to give a useful villain monologue, and they were well-chosen henchmen, too strong and stout for her struggle to even slow them down. They forced her to her knees and pushed her hands onto the crystal.

As soon as she made contact, thousands of consciousnesses were all reaching for her, grabbing at her mind

with all the thirst of someone lost in a desert. She was on the defensive, but the sheer number of attacks were impossible to counter, and something forced its way into her mind.

It had expected a vulnerable human's brain, not a mind with claws and teeth of its own. Romana took advantage of that, fighting back immediately, going limp as they battled for control. It didn't know her body like she did, she knew exactly which parts of her brain to cede and which to fight for, but she was already exhausted, and it could feel that too.

Romana felt the beginnings of a stalemate she'd never be able to outlast, so she gave the battle the closest thing it could have to physicality, retreating into a mindscape.

Her imaginary body stood in a castle made of thought. She was in its reception room, grand and uninviting; its architecture was an eclectic mix of styles—proportions and details reminiscent of the Jacobean Earth period, but with the Gallifreyan obsession with all things circular. Large glass windows took up much of the walls and various paintings that she remembered owned the rest, a Mona Lisa staring, judgingly, from the side.

An Earth-style clock hung just in her view, ticking not to an arbitrary unit of time, but to the beating of her hearts, both a reassurance that she still had control of the most important autonomic processes and a reminder that however much she might pretend otherwise, time was one thing she didn't have.

"Do come in," Romana said. "Wouldn't this be more interesting if we *talked*, rather than clawed at each other? Terribly primitive way to resolve a conflict. But then, so is stealing bodies."

There was a pause and then the invading presence gave itself form too, walking in with far too much righteous anger for someone who was trying to steal *her* body. "We wouldn't have to steal if we hadn't been robbed in the first place."

"Oh, that's original," she sighed. "Because obviously doing to others what was done to you will solve things in the long term. What happened, then?"

The humanoid form the other had chosen didn't look fully grown, but anger twisted her face, making her seem older. She snarled, "Rassilon ripped us from our bodies and locked us in that crystal for *millennia*."

The shock of hearing that name in such a context reverberated through Romana before she could think to hide it.

"You're one of *his*," she hissed, and her voice was so full of hate it cracked the glass windows. It had its own palpable presence in the room, a third party to the conversation, a loathing older than Heartshaven. Then, she laughed. "Oh, but this is perfect! He stripped us of our bodies, and now we can take one from a child of his." She took a mental stab at Romana, made purely of spite.

Romana flinched, her mental avatar blinking out of existence for a second, but when it was stable again, she merely looked at her, calm. "I'm hundreds of generations removed from him, yet you mean to hold me accountable for crimes committed by my most distant of ancestors? If you'd like proof that I harbour no similar inclinations towards alien species, you need

only look through my memories. I'll let you do that and no more."

She gave Romana a wary look but went through the open door of her memories. It was odd and unpleasant, letting someone rifle through her life, but though the reactions came through a veil of cynicism, there was more wonder to them than she'd expected, the invader hungrily drinking in the sights she'd seen, of alien suns and horizons, of metal dogs and pigbears and vortisaurs.

"So, what, you want me to believe you're some kind of cosmic do-gooder?"

"If you think I can fake over a century's worth of memories in such a short space of time, I'm flattered," Romana said. "I travel, I explore, and I never turn away if someone needs help. If blame and guilt can be inherited, haven't I done my part to leave the Universe better than he left it? And more to the point, you're not even trying to enslave *my* people; you're enslaving a race that doesn't yet have the capability to defend itself on a galactic level. What did humans ever do to you?"

Her face crumpled, and it struck Romana how *young* and confused she looked. Since when had she started to think herself old? "I was a child when he decided we needed to be punished! What did *I* ever do to deserve an eternity of damnation?"

"Now *that*," said Romana, and suddenly she was sitting at a table, the chair opposite already drawn in invitation, "is a fair question. Shall we discuss it like civilised beings?"

"I'm possessing you," she snarled, as if making that part absolutely clear would turn Romana into a cowering mess.

"You're not doing a very good job of it," Romana said. "Tea?"

She regarded the open chair with a feral sort of wariness, like Romana's every word was a trap waiting to spring. Far from looking ominous, the table was merely adorned with a tower of cakes, scones, and croissants. A teapot covered with a tea-cosy shaped like her robot sat next to it, a bit of whimsy amongst the grandeur.

"If I'm trying to trick you into anything, it's only having empathy," she remarked mildly. "I'm Romanadvoratrelundar, which you already knew, but it's polite to *ask* these things. And you are?"

"Ellery. It was Ellery Westwall, when we had a need for anything longer." Ellery sat, crossing her arms in pre-emptive defence, already looking so much smaller than she'd seemed when she'd been tearing at Romana's cerebellum and screaming through her synapses.

"Do you know, Ellery," she said, pouring her a cup of tea, "that there are adolescents—children—that come on these tours? What did *they* ever do to deserve your people's wrath?"

She looked away.

"What's the matter?" Romana asked, the politeness of her tone only making her words sharper-edged. "Have you never had to actually answer to the people you enslave before? I suppose it's easier when you can just shove them to the back of their own minds."

Ellery looked up with a sudden fierceness. "I've never done this before. I've been in that crystal since what you call the Dark Ages. I've been waiting for this for *millennia*. I thought

today was the day I would finally get to see the grass and the sky and move and breathe and feel like I was a person again and—" she faltered, her tone becoming desperate, begging Romana to understand, "And I thought that would be worth taking away someone's free will. It was the only way I was going to get to exist."

"I'm sorry that I'm not what you hoped for," Romana said, the words gentle rather than mocking. "That is a very long time to wait. Can you tell me why Rassilon imprisoned you all? I'm not saying he was *right*, but he did usually have reasons, even if they were as petty as 'they discovered fire too early.'"

Ellery bit her lip and spoke slowly, as if every word might be used against her if she wasn't careful. "I don't know the details anymore, I was young when it happened, and…the story's become corrupted after so many years. It's not really made of words anymore, if it ever really was. In the early days, it was more like a song of longing, of pain and loneliness, a plea to the rest of the Universe to hear our suffering and *release us*. Now, it's a shriek, its hate and anger and bitterness, and it's not a plea anymore, it's a challenge. *Just try and stop us.* But the core of it, that I can't forget, it's what I have instead of bones: the many were punished for the transgressions of a few."

Romana sighed. When she considered all the Time Tot tales she could remember, that sounded about right. Her people of old had been harsh with their punishments, and there had been no higher power to complain to. They hadn't seemed wrong when she was a child, she hadn't thought of them as anything other than natural endings to the narrative, or morals to be observed—curiosity could get you killed, even if you were just a child, or meddling with a timeline could get your entire species destroyed, even if only a single person had done the harm. It was harder to take a neutral position, faced with the fallout. "One of you must have gotten out, for this whole operation to have happened."

Ellery nodded. "Nothing changed. Nothing changed for thousands and thousands of years. We weren't in stasis; we were aware of *every* moment." She met Romana's eyes, broadcasting exactly what that had felt like, the loneliness, the feeling of being too isolated and too close at the same time, the horror of losing an entire body, every limb phantom, just thoughts echoing around for an eternity.

Romana winced, but didn't pull away from the memory. She had given Ellery hers, after all, to make her understand. She'd give her the same courtesy.

"And then finally, someone found us. A human. He touched the crystal, and one of us, Visser, just…jumped into them. He's our leader now. He says we're going get human bodies, every last one of us, and then declare war on the Time Lords."

"Do all your people agree? Don't his ideas seem a tad radical to anyone?" she asked, hopeful.

"We just want to be more than thoughts again, none of were thinking about the morality of it. And it's an echo chamber in there—there's not a proper distinction between us anymore. It's hard to hang on to individuality, ideas move through us like a storm, emotions pass on like a disease. We've been amplifying each other's

misery for millennia."

She raised an eyebrow. "You don't have democracy?"

"If we ever did, we don't anymore," Ellery said, a little harshly. "It's a bit hard to hold parliament in a rock."

"Then there's no way to unseat him as your leader?"

"Well," Ellery said, a little uncertainly, "we all have the right to challenge him for his position by trial of combat. But no one ever has."

"So, say, someone could challenge him to psychic combat and the winner would be listened to as a leader?"

"Yes." She frowned. "You don't mean…"

"It's a little underhand, but with two minds working together, I can only imagine we'd have a clear advantage."

"Who's to say I want to work with you?" hissed Ellery, suddenly cold and guarded again. "You're my enemy! You want me to betray my people!"

"I'm the child of the child, a hundred times over, of your enemy," said Romana. "And I don't think you want to hurt me anymore, which doesn't leave you with many options because I'm not going to let you hurt the human race."

She fell silent for a long moment. "I don't want to hurt anyone, but I can't just make everyone go back into the crystal, we'd rather die. Would you have me help you complete our genocide, Romana of Gallifrey?"

"No. I'd never ask that."

"Then what?" asked Ellery. "I just want back what was stolen from me. From my people. Can you give us that? I think we can make peace with the Time Lords, if you give us back what you took."

"It's not as simple as that, I'm afraid," Romana said, carefully. "I can't turn back time."

"You call yourselves *Time* Lords. Is that just about being pompous?"

"It means we understand time enough that we know changing it can't always be the answer, or the chaos from all of history being in flux would unbalance the Universe." Romana smiled with a touch of self-deprecation. "And it's a little about being pompous."

Ellery's smile was hesitant, but it was there.

"Your problem is you think the only options here are death, imprisonment, or enslaving a sentient species to save yourselves. There's another way, there's always another way. My first thought is I could steal you a loom and have it make bodies with no minds attached, it'd only be as morally dubious as cooking an unfertilised egg, really. Or I could be responsible about it and make a petition to the High Council on the grounds of correcting ancient wrongs, but the gears of bureaucracy turn slowly." Romana sighed. "We'll see. Is that a solution you could sell to your people?"

Slowly, Ellery nodded.

Romana grinned. "Great. Now we just have to win you leadership and change the minds of your entire people."

Ellery blinked, as if the enormity of what she'd done had only just caught up with her, and her doubts were loud enough for Romana to hear. *Who am I to bargain for the future of my race? I'm not a leader, I'm just ordinary.*

"You're just the person who, luckily or unluckily, happened to wind up

in my head." She agreed. "But you're also the one who decided that enslaving an innocent was too high a price to pay for your freedom. If that makes you ordinary, I think that's a very good thing to be."

Ellery smiled. It was nervous and tight, but a smile all the same.

Romana stood up, offering her hand. The glass windows were whole again, and the setting of two suns could be seen through them, casting them both in golden light. "Are you ready?"

Ellery took her hand with a laugh that bordered on hysterical. "Oh God, we're both going to die."

She raised an eyebrow. "Not quite the spirit I was going for, but I'll take it."

They woke up together, Romana letting Ellery take the lead as soon as she was aware of Visser towering over them.

"This one had a fault, sir," Ellery explained. "The heart almost stopped."

"We don't need defectives. Leave it and we'll take care of it."

"I can handle the heart, sir," she said quickly. "I've waited so long for this, please."

Visser looked at them for a long moment, and they braced themselves for a fight, but he nodded. "Look happy when you go out. Extra happy."

Ellery gratefully took it as a dismissal and headed back out to the tunnel. As soon as they were out of sight, Romana stopped, letting her body sag against the wall, exhausted by the effort the whole psychic battle had taken out of her.

Sorry.

It's fine, she thought back, *let's just find my friend.*

Romana walked out of the tunnel with the same enthusiasm as the others had had, an agreeable smile plastered on her face, and Sarah Jane approached her warily.

"It's okay. It's me."

Sarah Jane looked sceptical. "They're *not* re-enacting invasion of the body snatchers out here?"

"Oh, they're definitely taking over people's minds. It just didn't entirely work on me, and I've managed to convince my new friend here—her name is Ellery—that there's a way to solve the problems of her people that don't involve mass-slavery."

Sarah Jane blinked. "So, you're admitting you do have an alien in your head, but I should still trust you because you just happened to get a nice one?"

"I always have an alien in my head," Romana pointed out. "And while some of it was luck, I don't think this species is particularly war-hungry anyway, they just have a terrible leader."

"Don't we all," Sarah Jane said, still not looking entirely convinced.

Romana sighed. "Sarah Jane, you were right. You've known me for barely an hour and if I had been taken over, there's no conclusive way for you to tell if you're talking to me or an exceptionally good liar. There's no shibboleth I can give you—if we want to save the rest of these people, we don't have time for you to bring my robot down to ask about my favourite colour or something. I've only known you for an hour too, but I get the impression that you're the kind of person who will ignore all reason if people are in danger and you can save them. Trust me?"

After a pause, Sarah Jane nodded, and a relieved smile broke out on Romana's face. As she headed for the tunnel, Romana let Ellery exchange a whispered word with the tour guide, figuring she'd be better at making the excuse, before following.

"What's the plan?" asked Sarah Jane. "You *do* have a plan, I hope?"

"We're going to challenge their leader to a contest of wills, win, and then take the rest of them off-world to get them physical forms that don't already belong to someone else," Romana said promptly. "…And an unoccupied planet, I suppose, but one problem at a time."

"And if you lose?"

Romana didn't reply, partly because she was avoiding thinking about that eventuality and partly because Ellery was messing with things in her head. *Cut it out.*

Sorry, it's just…there's something weird, something wrong. With your memories, for starters.

With what?

She felt Ellery rustle around in her past, and suddenly she wasn't seeing the tunnel, or Sarah Jane, but a man she didn't know. He had a moustache, an inviting smile, and eyes that didn't quite match the rest of him, something too cold and calculating in them. It didn't feel like a memory, it felt like it had happened to someone else, far away and long ago, but when he pulled a chair out for her, he said, *Romanadvoratrelundar, what are we going to do with you?*

She distantly felt someone touch her shoulder, and she shook her head, forcing the memory that couldn't be hers away. She could see the tunnel again, but it was blurred darkness and the only thing that stopped her from tripping onto the floor was Sarah Jane's steady hand.

"Are you okay?" Sarah Jane asked, as she helped Romana right herself. "No offence, but you don't quite look up to winning a battle of wills right now."

"I'm fine. I'd be even better if *someone* would stop poking at my brain."

"She's not," put in Ellery.

"I didn't give you permission to use my own voice to contradict me!" snapped Romana, walking ahead to the door.

"It's all of our funerals," muttered Sarah Jane, but she followed.

Romana stopped at the door, biting her lip in hesitation, before turning to Sarah Jane. "Here's where the trusting us bit really comes in." Before she could react, she took her wrist and pulled her in.

Visser looked up as they entered, his expression still unreadable.

"Sir, sorry to interrupt, but my host was talking with her earlier, and she's a journalist, she was onto us. I thought it best to escort her here myself."

He nodded. "Good, bring her here."

Romana walked Sarah Jane up to the crystal, who put up what was hopefully a token struggle. Ellery was a bundle of nerves, but there was something else off with her, she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

It's your brain. It's weird.

Well, thanks, thought Romana.

I didn't mean like that, it's, it's like there's something else in here.

With that comforting thought, she found herself face to face with the leader. Sarah Jane squeezed her hand once before letting go.

"Sir, there's something else," said Romana, and then mentally stepped aside, letting Ellery speak.

"By the ancient rites of Karrion," she said, her voice only quivering a little, "in the name of the castle of Everfell, by the heart of our founder, long may he rest, I exercise my right to challenge you for leadership."

He laughed, as did the guards. A wave of derision even came off the crystal, a dismissal from everyone Ellery had ever known.

"You're a child, Ellery. Do you even remember what it was like before?"

Romana cloaked Ellery in her own confidence, gifted her with all the entitlement of a Heartshaven, and showed her what her body looked like when she was imperious, commanding, a leader.

"I was a child when we fell," Ellery said, and thanks to Romana, her voice didn't falter, however much her thoughts did. "But that was a long, long time ago, and you don't need a body to grow up. I have a vision for our people, one that involves finding a destiny of our own, not stealing the scraps of others. You don't lift a curse by throwing sacrifices at it. I'm Ellery Westwall, and I challenged you! Do you forfeit?"

He went quiet, and it was a dangerous kind of quiet, shifting from dismissive elder to something more predatory in the blink of an eye. "And how, ever-wise one, do you break a curse? What wonderous solution have you happened upon, that has eluded the combined intellect of our entire race?"

Ellery smiled. "Forfeit and find out."

"I accept your challenge," he growled, and put out his hand, palm up, and she met it with their own.

He hadn't expected the force of two minds, his own host both lacking the willingness and the capacity to help, and it was easy at first, they were winning, but then he threw all of his psychic might against Romana's shields. They faltered and…fell.

Her brain was too full of things, herself, Ellery, a key to a Key, and something else, something at the edge of her memory, unnameable, and—

Sarah Jane watched in horror as Romana collapsed. For a moment, the room was suspended in silence, but then Visser laughed and the guards followed suit.

She ran to Romana's side, ignoring their laughter, watching her chest rise and fall, a shimmer of golden energy escaping her mouth, but then it stopped, a stillness taking over.

She couldn't be dead. She couldn't be. Sarah Jane took Romana's hand in her own shaking palm. The last thing she wanted was someone in her head, and she didn't have the same psychic abilities, she wouldn't be able to enforce any kind of privacy. What if Ellery had given up on peace now?

The guards were walking towards her—slowly, they clearly didn't think she was any kind of threat. There was no time for excuses. She whispered, "I give you permission."

Ellery slid into her brain but instead of taking over, she was a blur of panicked thoughts. *She just…short circuited, her brain stopped working. I don't know what I did wrong, I didn't mean to hurt her!*

All too aware that the guards had almost reached them, Sarah Jane

thought, *Can't we challenge him together?*

You wouldn't be able to help, I'm not strong enough to defeat him on my own, Ellery thought, panicked and miserable. *We're finished.*

Sarah Jane stood up, meeting Visser's eyes with a different kind of confidence to Romana, but just as steely. "I'm Sarah Jane Smith of Earth, and I'm not afraid of you. I've fought Davros and his creations, the Sontarans, and Cybermen, and seen all of them tripped up by their own hubris. "

"Ellery can't even control a human now?" he sneered. "Those names mean nothing to me. We will colonise Earth without even having to fire a single weapon!"

"The thing about humans, Visser, that you've overlooked," she said, casually strolling over to the crystal, "is that we never give up." She plunged her hand onto its surface, quickly thinking, *Tell them your vision, Ellery! Tell them why they don't have to live at the expense of innocents!*

Ellery reached out to her people, and tried singing a new song, woven of the wonders she'd seen in Romana's and Sarah Jane's minds, extraordinary planets and people and places, of Romana's promise, a vision of a future they didn't have to steal.

Underground, in a dingy cavern, at the edge of a tube station that hadn't seen anything but tourists and filmmakers for years, Sarah Jane saw one of the most wondrous things she'd seen in a long, long time. She felt peace and hope spread through an entire population like wildfire, as quickly as hate had eroded it.

She turned to Visser, triumphant. "There's been quite a change of public opinion."

"They're impressionable," he growled. "It changes nothing."

"Oh, but I think it does," Sarah Jane said, walking towards him. To Ellery, she asked, *Are you ready now?*

Affirmative.

She would have laughed, if the circumstances had been any less grave. As it was, she stopped in front of him, putting out her hand, palm up. "We both challenge you."

"And you will both die for it," he promised, meeting the challenge with his own hand.

The battle was brutal and quick, Visser wasn't playing games anymore, only wanting to regain control as quickly as possible. There wasn't much that Sarah Jane could make much sense of. It wasn't something her brain had evolved to weather, but she could tell the tide of the battle, and it wasn't looking good. Confidence wasn't entirely making up for Ellery's inexperience, and her earlier attempted conquest hadn't been exhausting for just Romana.

Tell the human in there, tell him to fight back, thought Sarah Jane, desperately searching for a way to win.

She hadn't really thought that would change anything, but it did, somehow. He'd been stripped of agency for so long, perhaps Visser had simply forgotten to pay much attention, thinking his hold unbreakable, but whatever the reason, suddenly Ellery was winning.

She pushed on, ruthless and relentless, and even Sarah Jane could feel it, the tension of something on the edge of breaking. She didn't dare to believe it until his resolve finally burst, his shields cracking open and his

thoughts, memories, self, spilling out like egg shell and yolk.

Ellery opened their eyes. He was kneeling on the ground in front of them, eyes widening in shock. He grabbed a knife from his belt, and they jumped back.

"At least," he said, positioning the knife over an artery in his neck, "I will die with a body."

"No!" Sarah Jane shouted, scrambling forward, thinking of the poor man imprisoned inside his own mind, but they'd put too much distance between them.

I'm sorry.

Sarah Jane closed their eyes, letting herself grieve the stranger for a moment, and feel the guilt of not being quick enough. She'd find out his name later, she promised herself, find his family. What help she could offer them, she wasn't sure, but there had to be something.

You can't save everyone.

I know, she thought. *Listen, I've the worst migraine, I think I need to you leave. I'll sort the rest of the situation out, and Romana will come back when she's better.*

Ellery's panic at the thought of going back into the crystal almost sent their body into hyperventilation, but she got it under control. *Do you promise you'll come back?*

"I promise," she said, aloud. It felt more permanent, more like an oath that way.

I guess I have to trust you now. I'll call back the rest of my kin; no more humans will die for our freedom.

Thank you, she thought, as she headed back to the crystal, seeing it for the sacrifice it was. To go back, willingly, after so long of being trapped, to trust someone would come back for her, when the Universe had abandoned them so entirely before… *You're a credit to your people.*

If she'd had cheeks of her own, Ellery would have blushed. *Thanks. Um. Forgive me for prying, but I couldn't help but see some of your memories. You seem unsatisfied with your world. I don't quite know how Romana's solution will work, but you'd be welcome to come with us, if you wanted to see the stars again.*

Sarah Jane stopped, startled, as she touched the crystal. She couldn't deny it was tempting. *That's a wonderful offer, but I think today proves I can do good here. That's reason enough for me to stay.*

Goodbye, then, Sarah Jane Smith of Earth.

With that, Ellery jumped back in to the crystal, back to her people.

Sarah Jane sighed, exhausted. She had a dead body to explain and an unconscious woman she couldn't take to hospital—she refused to entertain the possibility that she had two dead bodies. It was so much easier when the adventure ended up with a dematerialising TARDIS.

The fifteenth time Sarah Jane checked, Romana was stirring awake.

"Thank God," she said, "I wasn't sure if I'd made it worse by moving you, I couldn't tell if you were even alive, but it's not like I could call an ambulance."

"Healing coma," said Romana, blinking, still dazed. "I'll survive. What happened?"

"I diagnosed the Mistress-Romana's condition correctly," the robot added, sounding put-out.

"You did," she patted him and explained all that had happened while she'd been unconscious.

"*You* won that psychic battle?" Romana shook her head. "Humans are indomitable. And Ellery?"

"She's fine, but she's back in the crystal, I said you'd be back as soon as you could."

At that, she made to sit up, but Sarah Jane caught hold of her shoulder. "Being theoretically able to stand doesn't count. *Rest.* I'll make us some tea." She paused. "Do you drink tea?"

Romana nodded, too tired to argue for once. "Milk and two sugars."

Sarah Jane soon returned with two steaming mugs and Romana took hers with a nod of thanks. "Now you're going to tell me what was going on with *your* head."

"Bad luck?" she tried.

Sarah Jane sat down next to the bed, raising an eyebrow. "Romana, you don't have to be psychic to spot a bad lie."

She sighed, taking a sip of tea. "It's…delicate information."

"I do have journalistic integrity, you know."

Her brow furrowed. "That concept's not translating well."

"What do you call a lying reporter on Gallifrey then?"

"A Prydonian," Romana said, smiling at her own joke. "I'm, well, I'm dying. Slowly, to a human, terrifyingly fast to a Gallifreyan. I've been a segment of the Key to Time since my last regeneration, and it would seem that plays havoc with the lifespan of an organic being. I'm decaying."

Sarah Jane let the silence hold for a moment, tone solemn. "I'm sorry. Is there nothing anyone can do? Can't the Doctor help?"

"He doesn't know. He'd try, I know he would, but if the Key to Time is unbalanced, it would endanger the Universe. It seems terribly selfish to go fiddling with such things when there's only a single life at stake." Seeing her sombre expression, Romana offered her a smile. "Don't get out the violins yet. I'm three hundred and three, I think I've had a good run of it."

"Still," said Sarah Jane, "no one wants to know it's coming. Do you…have a bucket list of things to do or anything?"

She blinked. "Not really. I've just been looking for things to fix, or mysteries to solve."

"Observation, Mistress: you have been displaying signs of positive emotion, such as changes in facial expression and vocal tone 2.7 times more often than usual. Suggestion: seek out others with common interests more often."

Romana raised an eyebrow. "Are you telling us to go and make friends?"

"Affirmative."

Sarah Jane laughed. "He may have a point, you know."

"Oh, don't let it get to his head." She smiled. "I meant it, before, even if it wasn't optimally phrased. You can have beginnings, as well as endings. I'd have either lost my body or my life today, if you hadn't been there."

Sarah Jane sighed, wistful. "I know. But seeing the stars, touching the wonders of the Universe, *saving* them, and then landing back in *Aberdeen*. it changes you, doesn't it?

"Irrevocably," Romana said. "You think it's different, being of a world

that's already catalogued the Universe, but you'd be surprised. An office is an office, regardless of whether it's in the Shining World of the Seven Systems or the City of London."

It was more of a relief than Sarah Jane had imagined, talking to someone who could understand, with no need for thinly veiled metaphors about travel and backpacking tours, lest talk of the interstellar and improbable ruin her reputation. "Would you change any of it, if you could? So that an ordinary life could satisfy you?"

"Not for all the world." Romana met her eyes. "I'd be a frightfully boring and narrow-minded politician by now, otherwise, yet think I knew all there was to know. Besides, what makes you think you'd be fulfilled by one of those just because you hadn't met the Doctor? Does he make wanderers, or does he just find them?"

Sarah Jane went silent. "I'd never thought of it like that. Good to know I'm not being crazy." She paused. "Couldn't you try being a…well, there must be some *better* kind of politician, somewhere in the Universe."

It was Romana's turn to mull over her words. "You think I should go home for good?"

"I think you need more of an action plan for your illness than ignoring it and dying. Use that Gallifreyan stubbornness for something useful, for once, won't you?" Sarah Jane's tone was firm, but there was a twinkle in her eyes. "While you're at it, you can make your people stop being xenophobic jerks and let humans come along for a visit once in a while."

Romana smiled. "I can certainly try." She sighed, drinking her last drop of tea and putting the mug to the side. "I should get back to Ellery. She's waited for long enough."

It soon became clear that however much further rest was warranted, Romana wasn't going to be persuaded of that. Sarah Jane helped her get her robot down the stairs, but that was as much aid as she accepted.

"Bye, Romana. I hope you're wrong about your illness, and if you're not, well, if you need a human to talk to, you know where to find me. We understand a thing or two about mortality."

"Goodbye, Sarah Jane." Romana's smile was bright and unguarded enough that Sarah Jane couldn't believe she'd ever seemed reserved or haughty. "You know, for the longest time I couldn't understand the Doctor's fascination with Earth. I really think I'm beginning to."

When the Stars Come to Man

William J. Martin

A star fell on upstate New York.

Air fizzled around the steel capsule. Rivets shuddered and burst from their sockets. Metal screeched, a dim yellow glow rising into blistering red.

With a final, apologetic whine, a directional fin peeled away. The ship flung to the side. It writhed in the air. A smoky black thunderbolt painted itself across the night sky.

It righted itself moments before hitting the trees.

Crackling wood joined the screaming metal.

A pillow of branches fell underneath the ship. The exhaust crunched as it hit the ground, smoke and oil smearing across the forest floor. The nose fell forward. Trees fell away. The world's largest shovel dug a trench through the forest. Roots tore themselves from the dirt. Vast trunks thudded down onto the ground.

The ship lay still.

A hatch hissed open. Bright blue smoke belched out.

A figure crawled from the wreckage, bound in a stained, white space suit. It collapsed to the ground. Weakly, it crawled toward the nearby foliage.

Three more suited figures climbed out through the hatch. They stumbled away after their comrade.

Smoke curled up from the ship's engine, intertwining with that of its interior. Strands of blue and black danced into the sky, merging with the night.

As the sun rose, unmarked tents materialised around the wreckage.

Joshua Townsend laid three flat boxes onto the office chair.

"Here we are. One margherita with stuffed crust for Inspector Ordinary; a barbeque chicken and sweetcorn for yours truly; and one—"

"Ham and pineapple," Sarah Jane Smith slid the middle box from the pile. "At long last. What took you so long?"

"Perhaps it's karma for not wanting to let slip your latest address on a pizza delivery. Not to mention the pineapple. Honestly, all the weirdness you've got me into and I'm still surprised that *that's* your order."

"Alright, the pair of you," Natalie Redfern pulled the top box onto her lap, before wheeling herself back toward Sarah Jane. She masked her growing smile with a screen of melted cheese. "Josh still hasn't told us about this big secret he's uncovered. I'm amazed you can both get anything done."

"You love us, really," Josh mumbled through a wad of chicken.

Sarah Jane glanced a smile toward Nat, before tucking into her own pizza. "Now, tell us what you have…"

"Long story short, there's an air force base hidden away in upstate New York. I know, that doesn't sound like much. Doesn't look like much either. The whole place has been empty for the past fifty-odd years. Nobody goes in, comes out, or even really moves around inside it. That is, until a little over a week ago. A pair of urban explorers went missing while poking around the area. I think it's something we should have a look into."

Sarah Jane tapped a finger to her lips.

"That's unfortunate. Terrible, rather. But I don't see why this isn't just a job for the local authorities. We can't handle everything, Josh, and there's plenty of missing people here on our doorstep that we could be tracking down."

"Right." He nodded. "Felt the same when I found out. Turns out, those disappearances weren't the only bit of weirdness going on. According to satellite photos—get this—a whole new aircraft hangar sprang up overnight. Still, no movement inside. No signs of construction. One minute it's a bit of New York woodland, the next it's paved and built over, ready to house a Spitfire, or whatever. Even the border fence moved to fit around it."

"What base did you say it was?" Nat leaned forward. "An air base, right?"

"Yeah. Baxter Air Force Base, it's called."

"Well, that's one more thing out of the ordinary." She turned on the spot, wheeling over to her laptop. "There aren't any Air Force bases in New York. Never have been. Certainly not one under that name."

"I'm not going to ask why you just happen to know this."

"Don't you have a comprehensive list of foreign military placements lying around?" She smirked. "I give mine a read every night before bed."

"Josh, you said 'satellite photos,'" Sarah Jane murmured. "You didn't happen to bring them with you?"

Josh nodded, reaching over to his bag. From inside, he pulled a folder filled with papers. He handed them all to Sarah Jane.

"Neatly arranged in date order, I think you'll find."

"Makes a change." She hummed, flicking through the papers.

Each showed a moat of trees, surrounding a misshapen, grey plaza. In one corner stood an array of buildings. Hulking hangars lined up opposite a nest of smaller blocks. Narrow runways reached out from the mass, black fingers grasping at the woodland.

As the photos progressed, the hand grew larger. Runways extended; new

buildings sprouted from nowhere, eating away at the woodland.

In the final photo, a sixth, vestigial finger burst from the hand. A new hangar stood away from its brothers. A warped circle of concrete pooled beneath it, loosely reaching the rest of the compound. The border fence followed its original path, swerving through a hairpin bend to accommodate the new arrival. Even the hangar itself stood at an odd angle from the others.

"A bit of a rush job, this last one," said Sarah Jane. "This doesn't seem to be the first of their sudden expansions, but for some reason this one…it's as if they built a whole hangar just to cover up a crime scene."

"And we still have no idea who 'they' are," said Nat from her laptop. "Or even what it's still doing here. I can only find this place on maps from the early 1960s. Anyone would figure the woodlands claimed it. I suppose those explorers felt the same when they went to have a look."

Sarah Jane nodded.

"Let's assume the two things are connected. People disappear in the area, a new building pops up that same night. Chances are these urban explorers got rather close to the perimeter before anything happened to them."

"I'd say it warrants a look," Nat continued. "If nothing else, I want to find out how they got that building up so quickly. If we can save a few lives while we're at it, I'd call that a decent day's work."

"Quite right," said Sarah Jane. "Good work, Josh. Where on earth do you find like this?"

"I have my ways," he cackled. "Nat isn't the only one who likes to cast a wide net."

"I'll book us some flight tickets in a moment," Nat called. "I'm coming with you, by the way. With this base buried out in the woods like that, there'll probably be terrible phone signal. Besides, I wouldn't mind a good look at their records."

"Right then," Sarah Jane clapped her hands onto Nat's shoulders, grinning between them both. "Pack your bags, Agent Scully. This looks like a job for the X-Files."

Baxter Air Force Base lurked at the end of a twisting, pockmarked line of tarmac, etched through the woods. The trees gathered tight around the sides of the road. Fallen branches sat in small, naturally-formed piles at the edges. Roots threatened to crack the jet black skin, and every few feet they succeeded.

A pair of chain-link fences cut across the road. The trees continued until their leaves scraped against the metal. A guardhouse stood three feet from the gate. Beyond the fences was a concrete plain. The outskirts of the base stood eighty yards from the fence. Squat administration buildings huddled around the road. Hangars loomed further afield. The rounded roofs poked above the closer buildings, glowering back, past the gate.

Sarah Jane stood five feet from the first fence. Josh stood off to the side, with Nat staring back toward the hangars.

"Certainly looks empty," said Sarah Jane. "Of course, the real test…"

She trudged back down the road, away from the base. Ducking down by the underbrush, she wandered for five yards. One hand hovered over the

muck. Pausing, she reached down, picking out a long, thin branch. Victorious, she returned to the others.

"I assume there's a method to your sudden madness?" asked Josh.

"Come on, city boy." Sarah Jane shook her head. "That fence may look fine, but there's a rather strong chance it's electrified. Not only that, but it's probably a much stronger charge than something only meant to herd cows. What we need is something to draw out the current. Just enough that we can feel it, but not enough to—"

"Raise Frankenstein's monster. Makes sense."

"Exactly. Grab one end of this, lay the other on the fence. If you can't feel anything, then start moving your hand up the branch until you do."

"Clever, clever.

"Flattery, Josh," she grinned, turning toward the guardhouse. "I'm going to try this side of the gate. Nat, see if you can have a look around inside there. If there is power, then we might be able to just open the front door."

"I'm on it," Nat said, moving toward the lone hut.

"Josh, I want you to check the opposite side of the fence. You can never know too much, especially when electric fences are involved."

"Gotcha."

He turned to his designated end of the fence. On this side of the gate, the trees gathered in a heavy cluster. Trunks scraped against each other, with the ground a tangled mess of squabbling roots. Between the fence, and the tarmac, it seemed the edges of the wood had been sliced into a right angle. He turned back down the road. After the initial knot of branches, the woods thinned out.

"I'm just going to scoot around a little, SJ!" he called back to the others. "Don't want to get too close until we know it's alright. I won't go too far."

"Be careful, Josh," Sarah Jane called back.

"Yeah, I'll be alright," he nodded. A space opened between the trees, and he slipped inside.

The underbrush rustled beneath his feet. Twigs snapped, leaves crunched, and yet…

"Not exactly reclaimed land, is it?" he mumbled to himself. "There's more wildlife poking around SJ's bins than here."

The trees thinned. He turned back toward the base. A glimpse of light from the fence came into view. A pair of trees stood together, bent outward from the root. Their trunks fell back as they spread apart, with higher branches intertwining with those nearby. Josh strode toward the space between them.

With his left hand he gripped the inclined wood. Jamming that shoulder into the tree, he levered the rest of himself up from there. His right foot dug into the tree opposite. Beyond him stood a foot of dry, brown grass, and the border fence.

Above him, a long, dry branch poked out of the tree trunk. He reached up, snapping it off with his right hand. Dust fell from the wood. A light snowfall of ash that clung to his arm, staining his shirt white.

"Eh?"

Half the branch dissolved as he looked at it. The bark crumbled, revealing a rotten, blue-green interior. The remaining wood appeared unaffected, albeit drier than what he'd seen by the road.

He leaned away from the tree. With

his now-free hand, he scratched at the trunk. The dry bark crumbled away at the barest effort.

Wind rustled through the trees behind him.

Leaning forward, he stepped into the foot of space by the fence. The grass withered underfoot. A cloud of pale dust whirled around his shoes. Josh glanced up and down the empty space. The tree line slanted backward, leaning away from the fence.

He looked down at the withered branch. Then back up at the trees. Josh raised his arm, aiming for a nearby trunk.

He threw the branch.

It slammed into the bark.

The branch shattered. Fragments of blue-green wood fizzled into mist.

A gash opened on the tree trunk. Dry bark fell away to reveal a sickly core. The edges of the wound crumbled open for a moment, before hissing to a halt.

"Now that's definitely weird. One more thing to add onto the pile, I suppose."

A low whistle rang between the trees.

A sharp pain ran through his neck.

Josh ran his hand along his skin. A dart protruded out.

He swivelled on his heel, turning toward the forest.

The light dimmed. His eyes grew heavy. Shadows crept in around him.

The underbrush rustled. Shapes moved forward through the wood.

A flash of crimson…

"Oh no."

He fell backward onto the fence.

Inside the guardhouse stood a grid of nine blank screens. A bank of controls sat underneath. Myriad buttons and switches protruded out toward the centre of the room. Beneath them, a set of four indents marked the site of an old stool, long since removed. Nat pushed herself inside, taking her position above the indents.

She flicked down a control switch. The lower-left screen blinked, filling with static. Nat paused, inching over to a random, nearby button. She pressed it down. The centre-right screen crackled to life, again filled with static.

She leaned away from the controls.

An image fizzled onto the lower screen. A parabolic curve, with the apex slotting into the lower-left corner. The ends of the curve sat on a slanted line which cut across the upper-right edge of the screen.

The top row of screens snapped on. More curves, slotting into each corner, each spreading out from a tilted square in the centre.

Light flooded the guardhouse. Every screen blazed blue, before simmering down into its chosen image.

Put together, it looked like a heavily stylised atom. Four electrons bounced around a solid, square nucleus. A circle glared out from the centre screen. Four lines cut it into quarters, with each glowing a dark, pulsating blue.

Nat squinted at the screens, unmoving. With a flourish, she launched forward. Random switches flicked on and off.

The atom gazed out, unmoving.

"Nat?" came a voice from outside.

"Sarah!" she called back, plucking her hands away from the controls.

Sarah Jane poked her head through the door.

The atom froze. Its light dimmed to

nothingness. A final pulse grew from the centre screen. A vast, all-encompassing blue overwhelmed the full set of screens. The atomic image faded, dissolving into its own light.

The screens died. Sunlight crept into the guardhouse.

"That wasn't you, was it?" asked Sarah Jane.

"I hadn't even tested to see if the power was on," said Nat. "I'd just flicked a random switch and…"

"Very odd indeed…" Sarah Jane whispered. "Well, at least we know for sure that there's some power here. Let's see if we can't find a way to get the gate open."

A steel scream rang through the guardhouse. Outside, the gate scraped open.

Sarah Jane strode outside, pausing at the open threshold. She tapped her lips, giving off a quiet hum.

"We have to find Josh. Before anything else happens, I want to have us all together."

"You'd better find him fast." Nat moved to Sarah Jane's side. She gestured behind them, pointing above the tree line. "Either that, or he'll have to find us."

A blurred shape roared across the horizon. It grew larger, and features solidified as it approached. What first seemed to be wings morphed into two large pods. These clung onto a central spine, upon which two more pods were connected. At the very rear was a jet.

"It's some sort of personal aircraft," said Sarah Jane. "And not one that I recognize the design of. Does anything feel like being the slightest bit familiar today?"

The craft floated toward them, breaking away with half a mile to go. It swerved into the base. Sweeping over the closest block of buildings, it meandered around back toward the gate. It came to a halt, only twenty feet behind the fence. The front pointed directly at the pair of them.

"They've spotted us, whoever's inside," said Nat.

"And more importantly, nothing in the base seems to have reacted to its arrival." Sarah Jane raised her arms, eyes fixed on the craft. "Stay behind me."

Sarah Jane strode forward through the gate.

The craft floated down. Now in plain view, the thing was a bright white. Two large pods stuck on the ends of a wide, central chassis. Two more clung to either side. Wings extended out from these, with jets poking through the rear of all but the foremost pod.

Dust whirled around the ship as it silently fell to Earth.

A line silently cut through the front pod. It slid across the entire top half, retreating around to the back. The section within the line rose with a hiss. It swung up, opening to reveal a mass of grey stone within.

The stone had been molded into the rough shape of a man. Sharp protrusions extended out from its shoulders. A cobweb of cracks riddled its surface. An orange glow pulsed within the rock, passing between the cracks

"Oh my…" Nat mumbled behind Sarah Jane. "That's not…that isn't a human being. It can't be. That and the pod…Sarah…h-have we—"

"Whassat, kid?" the stone croaked. A crack opened in place of a mouth. "You getting all excited about making some kinda 'first contact'?"

Nat froze, glancing up at Sarah Jane. Sarah Jane's eye twitched, in time with the corner of her lip.

"Lemme tell ya, I'm gonna be making first contact with something by the time we're done here. Better believe it won't be either of you, though."

"Have I seen you somewhere before?" Sarah Jane smirked.

"I dunno," said the stone creature. "I've been told I got one of those faces."

"Sarah, you're being…rather flippant about this."

"Don't worry, Nat," she said. "It seems we've got some unexpected help with this one."

The three other pods hissed open.

In the rear pod sat a tall, greying man. A twinkle shone in his eyes, warming a face weighed by time and exhaustion.

The pod to Nat's left housed a younger man. One hand rested on his jaw, the arm leaning against his knee. The other ran through his shock of golden hair. He glanced between the stone creature, Nat, and Sarah Jane.

To Nat's right, a woman rose from her pod. The golden hair and face matched the younger man's.

Each of the three wore a bright blue jumpsuit. Stark, white belts and gloves completed the costume. The same stylised atom from the guardhouse hung on their chests. Though, while the icon from the guardhouse had its entire central circle filled with dark blue, here only one quarter was filled in for each person.

"Jacob, don't be rude!" the woman said, stepping down toward them. She halted by the vehicle's front, addressing Sarah Jane and Nat. "I'm sorry about him, this is just how he gets when we all have to use the car."

"So would you if you were supposed to drive with no legroom!" The stone creature, Jacob, huffed. He leaned back in his pod, folding his arms.

"That's perfectly alright," said Sarah Jane. "So, if that's Jacob up there, I suppose I should call you…'Deborah,' was it?"

The woman chuckled.

"I do prefer to be called Ms. Phantasm. But yes, Debbie, to my friends. The young man over there is my brother, Starblaze, and the man behind us is my husband, Stephen."

"I'm sorry, slow down a little," said Nat. "Sarah, who are these people? How come you know a huge…rock…person, who happens to pilot some kind of futuristic aircraft? And, more importantly, how come you've never thought to bring it up over the years?"

"I must say, I am quite surprised myself, dear," said the woman named Debbie. "We've done rather well at keeping a low profile all of these years. You're the first person to know us on sight in…oh, I don't know how long."

"Yes. Excuse me," Sarah Jane began. "Nat, it's quite the honour to introduce the Quintessence Quartet."

"The what?"

A sudden burst of light exploded from the other side of the craft. The younger man, previously still in his pod, now stood alongside his sister.

"The Quintessence Quartet. That's us. The world's premiere super team. The name's Starblaze, good to meet you."

"…No. I'm still not getting it. Sorry. No matter what sort of tech you're

carrying around with you, you can't just say that. You can't just call yourselves superheroes. That's nonsense. Where are you even from?"

"The QQ here are a surprisingly well-kept secret," said Sarah Jane. "They've been active since the sixties, or at least that's when I knew about them. They were one of my first goals as a lowly newspaper writer. 'Whatever Happened to the Super Heroes?' Turns out, nobody really knew. They simply vanished. One day they were fighting off cosmic villains from outer space, and the next…"

"We fell into obscurity," said Debbie. "Stepped back from the public consciousness. But we're still ourselves; we still have our powers."

"And by the looks of things, you haven't aged a day," added Sarah Jane.

"I'll pass the compliments to my hairdresser," grumbled Jacob.

"Now, you know who we are," Debbie began. "But now, if I could ask you the same? What you're doing here?"

Sarah Jane glanced down at Nat. Nat glanced up at Sarah Jane.

"My name is Sarah Jane Smith," she said. "I'm—was—a journalist."

"I'm Natalie. Nat."

"Two people vanished around this base just a few nights ago," Sarah Jane continued. "Just a bit of investigation showed that wasn't the first bit of strangeness to occur around here. Nat and I felt it warranted a look. I'm guessing you're here for much the same reasons."

"Not quite," Debbie's husband, Stephen, strode around the pod. "Our attention was drawn here thanks to a sudden burst of energy two nights ago. This energy is on a spectrum that only we can detect. Upon further investigation, we too realised that lives may have been lost here. At that point, our interest developed into our responsibility."

He held out a hand. Sarah Jane shook it. Nat did the same.

"Dr. Stephen Sinclair. It's an honour to meet you both."

"Speaking of which," began Nat. "What's happened to Josh? He should have been back ages ago."

"Josh? A friend of yours?" Sinclair raised an eyebrow.

Nat nodded.

"One moment."

Sinclair's torso warped. Everything between his arms and his waist stretched to three times its length, curling around in place like a rope of caramel. His top half swooped back around the craft, with his feet locked in place.

Nat stared, mouth agape.

He rummaged inside his pod. Moments later, his elongated body snapped back into place. He held a sleek, white radar gun. Tapping away at its controls, he spoke.

"While this device is principally designed to track the radiation we mentioned, it can, with a little reprogramming…"

The gun beeped.

"Be used to search for human life signs. Now, let's see if we can't find…"

He aimed the gun past Sarah Jane and Nat. Slowly, he began to sweep the horizon. His voice fell to an inaudible mumble.

"Did…" Nat blinked. "Did nobody…"

"Yeah," said Jacob. "That's the big brain's thing. All of his atoms do ex-

actly what he wants. He can stretch, split in two if he wants…all sorts of stuff."

"It can be quite disconcerting at first," Debbie said. "But we've long since grown accustomed to our powers. Danny—Starblaze, here, can change all the atoms of his body into photons, if he chooses. I can widen the spaces between atoms, turning things utterly intangible. And Jacob—"

"And Jacob has the most beautiful little eyes you ever did see. Nah, all my atoms are bunched up together. Not sure how that translates to me looking like a lost Michelangelo, but that's the way it is."

A shrill, repeating bleep burst from Sinclair's radar.

"Ms. Smith. I'm afraid I may have located your friend," he glared at the gun's screen. "Unfortunately, he may also be in great danger. I'm sorry."

"What?" Sarah Jane strode around him, peering into the same screen. "What does that mean? Where is he?"

"I found no life signs in the surrounding area. If he was in the outskirts of the base, as you were just before we arrived, then he's moved on. Or, as I suspect, someone else found him."

He handed the gun to Sarah Jane. Six dots flashed on the screen, one for each of them nearby. Sinclair pointed her into the base, tilting the radar downward.

Seven dots blinked beneath the ground.

"I'm very sorry, Ms. Smith, your friend is not alone."

Darkness gave way to darkness.

Flickering stars pierced through into sight. Pinpricks of green and red, clicking in and out of a hazy existence.

A vast shape eclipsed the starfield.

"He's awake."

The voice rumbled in his ear as if passing through treacle.

"Leave him be," said another voice. "He isn't going anywhere, and we need to keep him breathing."

The starfield returned, clearer this time. Josh squeezed his eyes closed. With a shake of his head, he cracked them back open.

In front of him stood a hulking row of computers. LEDs glimmered inside the plastic casings. Eight computers extended out to either side of him. Two identical rows stood deeper in the room. A hum in his ear told him at least another row sat behind him.

On the opposing wall hung a vast screen. It stretched fifteen feet across, and seemed taller than Josh himself.

On the screen was a stylised atom. Four electrons span around a square nucleus.

The atom pulsed a dark blue.

Six men stood around the room. Four congregated beneath the screen. One sat at a computer off to the left. The sixth man loomed over Josh, glaring at him before turning to his comrades.

"He seems to be breathing just fine at the moment," he said. "Perhaps we should put him back under and see what happens."

"Enough," said the man to the side. "I wasn't even comfortable bringing him in by force at all. Touch a single hair on the back of his neck, and you'll answer to the Keeper."

The man nearby looked between Josh and his comrade. He turned away with a low huff.

"And they say hospitality is dead,"

Josh croaked.

"Just because I want you alive doesn't mean I want you here," said the man to the side. "I expected the White Chapter to send someone. That they'd be brazen enough to send their own Keeper's son…"

"Wanting someone alive? Doesn't sound like your sort's MO. I thought the Crimson Chapter was all about everyone dropping dead. Rivers of blood and all that Revelations nonsense."

"Our respective Chapters are built from the same doctrine, Keeper's son." The man rose from his seat. "You comprehend the Great Helix as humanity's salvation. We see it as humanity's destruction. While I may foresee the end of days, that does not mean I condone needless bloodshed before then."

"Charmed."

Josh slumped back into his chair.

"Sergeant Hayes," one of the men beneath the screen turned toward them. "We've brought it out of standby."

"Excellent work, Armitt. Keep going." He turned to Josh. "At last, boy, the centuries reach their end. Our conflict shall fade, and then we shall learn the fate of the human race."

The first building was hollow. Double doors opened onto a blank, white tunnel, tilting downward. Starblaze glanced through the windows nearby. A thin layer of metal cupboards gave way to an empty void.

The second building contained the same. Blank walls extending back, drooping down into the ground. Regular, dim lights slotted into the wall at ground level. Looking down the hallway, the lights continued ever onward, eventually consumed in shadow.

At the third building, they walked inside. Sarah Jane, Nat, and the Quintessence Quartet descended into the depths of Baxter Air Force Base. Their footsteps clattered along the hard, metallic floor.

Twenty yards down, the corridor swerved to the right. Ten more and it meandered back to the left. The downward incline held steady. The only constant was the descent.

Another corridor opened into the wall, this time extending upward. A dim light shone from the other end.

Sinclair looked over to Starblaze. The young man nodded. His physical body melted away, and in its place emerged a gleaming, golden light. It overtook his flesh like vines consuming a brick wall. After only a moment, he stood as a golden copy of his former self.

Starblaze vanished up the corridor. Seconds later, he returned.

"Just another of those hollow buildings." The light of his body already retreated back into flesh and blood. "Exactly the same. It's like nothing in this place has more depth than a matte painting."

"Maybe we should track down whoever did the interior design," Jacob chucked. "The living room could do with a bit of good old fashioned minimalism, huh, Deb?"

He nudged her with his elbow.

Debbie glared at him.

"There's something to that assumption, Danny," Sinclair tapped his lips. "Given the base's location, and its sheer emptiness, perhaps the whole thing is little more than a single, vast disguise of some kind."

"That would explain just how this place manages to expand so suddenly," Sarah Jane added. "If it's only supposed to be an outer layer, why add anything else? But that still doesn't give us the 'why'…"

She squinted further down the main corridor.

Without a word, she stepped forward. She gestured back for the rest to follow.

The corridor opened out into a vast chasm. The floor lights continued on either side of the entryway, once again vanishing past sight. Everything beyond a ten foot radius lay under a shroud of darkness.

"Starblaze, could you let us see a bit further, please?" Sarah Jane called back.

Danny nodded. His hand glimmered—an ethereal, golden orb forming in his hand. He tossed it into the wider room.

The room itself was built from flawless, white concrete. Danny's orb, along with the floor lights, marked the breadth of the room. The walls extended twenty feet out from either side of the corridor. From there, they vanished into the distance. Even with the extra light, the ceiling remained in darkness.

Sinclair held up the radar gun. He tapped the controls, with the device emitting a small bleep.

"The room itself seems to extend for almost one hundred feet. What could they have been doing here…?"

"Almost as big as an aircraft hangar," Jacob added.

"I don't think it's that at all," Sarah Jane said.

A vast, dark tube slumped in the centre of the room. It stretched thirty feet across, with the opening being twice Sarah Jane's height. Danny's light dimmed. She stepped closer.

A blanket of pure white lights flickered on, glaring from the tube's ceiling. A vast hallway stretched deep into the chamber. Every surface was a dull grey. Glass booths had been built into the left side of the hall, containing drab, black desks. On the right, regular windows looked out into the darkness of the wider hall. Circular tables dotted the floor closest to them. Fluorescent pink chairs clustered around each table, the only source of colour in the entire base.

"What on Earth…"

Sarah Jane strode into the hallway. The floor seemed to curl upward, steadily, over the course of its length. Not an incline, but more so a…

"Like the inside of a space station."

"Not sure why a space station would need a bunch of bright pink chairs," said Nat. "Especially not ones that look so retro."

"Hey…hold it. Hold on one sec!" Danny rushed into the hallway. He ran past Sarah Jane, carrying himself past the first glass booth. "This isn't a space station. It's a movie set!"

"But what would a movie set be doing here?" said Debbie.

"Don't tell Josh," Sarah Jane smirked. "He'd go spare that he missed this."

Her face fell.

"It would certainly be nice if anything decided to add up around here."

Jacob moved to the hallway's edge. He looked around, before wedging his foot down on the end of the tube. The wood crumbled.

"Must have been here some time too. This wood is soft as a marshmallow."

He tilted his foot, moulding a ramp into the tube. He stepped back, gesturing at Nat.

"Thanks," she said. She pushed herself up, into the hallway.

Sinclair and Debbie stood by the edge of the tube, looking in.

"I've continued to track the radiation since our arrival," he said. "All I know is, it's deep below us. As for an exact location…"

"We'll find it, darling." She laid a hand on his arm. "But for now, we have something more to focus on. These two have lost a friend. If nothing else, we can help them find him."

"Actually, that's something I've been meaning to ask after."

Sarah Jane appeared at the hallway's edge, leaning against the wall.

"This radiation of yours. Tell me about it. There's been far too many unanswered questions thrown my way recently, and I think you can help me with at least one of them."

Sinclair looked to Debbie. Debbie looked back at Sinclair.

He sighed. "You seem intelligent Ms. Smith. Worthy of trust. If you're going to venture deeper into this base with us, then you have a right to know what we may find."

"This isn't the first time the four of us have been here, Ms. Smith," Debbie said. "Though it has definitely been a while."

"As you may know from your research, the four of us—myself, Debbie here, her brother, and our friend, Jacob—obtained our rather fantastic abilities while on an experimental space flight. The ship I designed successfully launched. For a while, I dared to dream that I had done it. That we were the first human beings to venture outside the frontiers of our world."

"But we became more than that. Yes, we did manage to enter the upper atmosphere. We even began to establish some kind of orbit. Until…"

"Somehow, we came into contact with an unknown form of alien intelligence. We still know so little about it, or why it chose to come here. The only certainty is that its presence doused both us and the ship in some sort of cosmic radiation. The ship's systems malfunctioned moments after first contact. Were it not for Jacob's ability to bring the ship down, none of us would have survived."

Sarah Jane pursed her lips.

"But with the systems malfunctioning, the landing must have been dreadful."

"It was, dear. I've never been so frightened as I was that night. But still, Jacob brought us down. On this very spot."

"I still remember every second. The four of us, clutching onto sanity through each other. The horror as our own bodies warped and vanished around us. We may have been friends before then, Ms. Smith, but it was those few moments that made us a family."

"So…" Sarah Jane looked between both of them. "You believe this same radiation that gave you your superpowers is still covering this area. But how?"

"A week after the crash, I returned here," Sinclair continued. "I had to recover the craft. If nothing else, it had been my life's work before the accident. But by that time…a presence had already built around the area."

"We felt the military had already

found it," said Debbie. "Now, of course, we would simply ask for it back. But Jacob…Danny…the poor boys were scared out of their minds. We'd all seen monster movies, and what happens to them…"

"So, for years, I've merely monitored the area. I've watched from afar, but never felt it necessary to intervene. Until now. The burst of radiation last night was unlike anything felt since…well…"

"Since your crash," said Sarah Jane.

"Indeed."

"So now that you've come here, have you managed to piece something together that I haven't?"

"Not quite everything, Ms. Smith. But I do have a few working hypotheses."

"Go on."

"The craft is still here. It is still buried deep below us, either in some sort of lab, or even in its original crater. That's unimportant. Everything is unimportant in the face of one possibility…"

His eyes darkened.

"I fear we may not have been the only ones to survive that crash. I fear the alien intelligence somehow latched onto the ship. I fear that somehow, it has remained alive throughout the decades. I fear that even now, deep beneath our feet, it is watching us."

The vast screen buzzed. The atomic insignia split into red, blue, and yellow shards.

"Exiting standby mode."

Two voices rang throughout the room. Two distinct tones, layered on top of each other. One smooth, calm. The other a low, hissing grind.

"Welcome, human race," the voice continued. "My name is Gordon. Welcome, and thank you for joining us on our way to the stars."

The room fell silent.

"Preliminary scans indicate seven human life signatures within the main control room. Wider scans shall continue without cause for lack of conversation."

Hayes spoke.

"I am Sergeant Hayes of the Crimson Chapter. We come as emissaries of the Orbus Postramo."

He lay a hand on Josh's head.

"Introduce yourself, Keeper's son. I may not wish to harm you, but you know damn well what we're looking at."

Josh glared at him.

"My name is Joshua Townsend," he grumbled. "I'm heir to the White Chapter of the Orbus Postramo. But keep it to yourself, why don't you?"

Hayes let Josh go.

"The Orbus Postramo," Gordon repeated, one layer of his voice just slower than the other. The fragmented shards on the screen reconvened. The single atom glared out into the room.

"Our Chapters have been locked in eternal feud since the first arrival of the Great Helix," Hayes continued. "We seek answers. Is the Helix a beacon of our annihilation, or enlightenment? We believe that this base holds those answers."

"The Helix…" Gordon hummed. "Auxiliary data banks are aware of the subject. Mandragora…Mandragora… You say that you are…servitors of the Helix? That you follow its cosmic movements, move according to its will?"

"I…in a sense," Hayes answered.

"Generations of writing have taught us that the Helix came to Earth once before, offering both power and destruction. That same writing assures us that it would once again return. Our every effort since then has been to prepare for its arrival."

The screen whirred.

"Look, enough of all this," said Josh. "Both of our chapters reckon that you've got the answer to our age-old question. From the looks of it, you have. Now, do you mind answering it so I can get my hands untied, please?"

"The Helix…is here."

"…What?" murmured Hayes.

"You seek the Mandragora Helix," Gordon stuttered, twin voices falling out of sync. "The Mandragora Helix is…here. Within me. Pl—"

Both voices halted. A red hue filled the screen.

"Interlopers detected in upper hangar."

Josh bit his lip.

"Interlopers detected. Priority blue. Interlopers must be nullified before further progress is made."

The insignia faded. A square grid covered the screen.

Each cell of the grid displayed a group of six wandering through the gray hallway, littered with futuristic, kitsch furniture. One seemed to be a hulking, inhuman mass of stone. Nat moved between the chairs, chasing after a young man. Sarah Jane stood by an older man and another woman.

"Oh God, SJ…" Josh sighed.

"Sarah Jane Smith."

"Eh?"

"Sarah Jane Smith must be eliminated."

Hayes squinted at the screen. One by one, individual videos froze, each with Sarah Jane's face in clear view.

"You of the Crimson Chapter," Gordon continued. "You believe in humanity's annihilation under the Helix. After your long years of service, I grant you this belief."

Purple sparks cracked between the rows of computers. A shrill buzz stirred throughout the room.

Bolts of electricity shot out from the computers, striking each member of the Crimson Chapter. Hayes stumbled back. He gripped the edge of Josh's chair, still staring at Sarah Jane's face.

Every atom fell still.

And then, in perfect time, the universe turned.

Every sound crept up into a scream. Every vibration roared into a seismic shift. Every breath a cacophony of atoms and energy colliding.

The screams rose higher, and became a chorus.

Anguished harmonies wrapped around each other. Each voice added a note, sustained in a moment of absolute fear.

The sound raged through Hayes' head. A pressure drove at the back of his mind. It pierced his brain, his blood, his very soul. The universe itself ran through his DNA. He was nothing but a wayward mote of reality. Born of lifeless atoms, and soon to die of the same.

Before his very eyes, his men dissolved into the fabric of existence.

Their flesh faded into dust. The dust ignited into energy.

Electricity bound their wayward atoms, purple fire roaring in place of their souls. Their features faded, consumed by blinding darkness. They stood in place, perfectly still, while

their heads flickered into blank slabs.

Hayes felt himself crumble. A withered spark in the face of an inferno.

The spark flared one final time.

He turned to Josh, grabbing the boy's shoulders. A strained whisper passed his lips.

"The Herald. You brought her right here, to the Helix. You've brought about the end, boy. The Helix shall bring our annihilation. You did this. Y-you…"

His voice fell away, subsumed by the chorus of screams.

The hands on Josh's shoulders sizzled. Purple glimmers crept through the fibers of Hayes' gloves.

Dark light swirled within the man's body. Energy shone throughout his entire being, crackling from within the ground up into his chest. Light flared around his neck.

Scorching heat burned at Josh's shoulders. His mouth fell open in a dry gasp. He squeezed his eyes closed, the light around Hayes' neck flashing brighter.

Purple tendrils curled around the man's head. Hayes' scream faded into a croak. At last, he fell silent. Strands of light and mist circled his missing face.

A light snapped on in the circle's centre. It stared at Josh, a single monstrous eye. The light flashed. Hayes' hands crackled with heat.

Josh's body slumped back.

Sinclair's radar hissed.

"Movement. The cluster we've been tracking has broken apart. It appears that…no…"

"What?" asked Sarah Jane.

"The readings themselves…" Sinclair murmured. "They're moving yes, but also changing. This device is programmed to track human life signals, and yet…"

A bolt of purple lightning crackled across the empty room.

It struck the edge of the curved hallway. Fingers of energy clawed the wooden surface. It gave way, bursting into flames.

Four figures emerged from the darkness. Each was wrapped in a black, padded uniform. They walked in perfect time. Their every movement coordinated together. Each had one arm extended, pointing to the set exactly at the spot currently on fire. Purple sparks snapped at their fingertips.

"Think we found your 'altered life signals,' Steve?" Jacob called.

"Evidently so, old friend. Though, as to what they are…"

Another blast. A chunk of the ceiling crashed down, sparks spitting between broken shards of wood.

"I got an idea!" Jacob stomped toward the hallway's end. "How about I go ask them, all nice and polite!"

Danny rushed after him, his lower body already beginning to gleam. "Now there's a plan, big guy. Maybe we can stop them shooting at us while we're at it."

"And people say ol' Sinclair is the brains of this operation."

Jacob gripped the outer rim of the hallway. He strode forward. One step shook the ground. Another dented the floor.

With the third, he launched upward.

A handful of lasers blasted into the darkness above the hallway. The light cut a large, stony shadow onto the room's outer walls.

Jacob smashed back down. Both fists slammed into the ground.

The four figures reeled apart. One stumbled, balancing on a single foot. Sparks trickled from its flailing arms. It fell backward. As it hit the ground, its body continued to drop. It finally stopped, buried half an inch into the concrete floor.

"That's one dealt with," said Debbie. She turned to Sarah Jane and Nat. "The both of you, get back. We'll handle this."

Nat turned toward the opening of the hallway. She wheeled herself backward, pushing past a gathering of vast, fluorescent chairs. She spun around, putting herself perpendicular to the room's curvature.

Sarah Jane paced backward, still facing the mouth of the hallway.

"I've seen these before…I have. I *must* have…" she whispered. "But where…where…"

Two gleaming figures approached the hallway's mouth. They glanced at Sinclair and Debbie, before snapping their view toward Sarah Jane.

They raised their arms.

A flash of light blazed through the room.

One figure remained in place, its head twitching wildly. The other flung against the far wall to the right.

Sinclair stormed forward.

The one creature still standing by the hall's entrance snapped to attention. It raised its arm once again, pointing at Sarah Jane.

Sinclair's midriff warped inside his suit. His body stretched into a long, curled ribbon of flesh. He flung his top half forward, wrapping his elongated body around the creature.

The creature's face remained fixed on Sarah Jane. It writhed inside Sinclair's grip. Lumps of flesh the size of a fist juddered out from his stretched body.

"Gah!"

Sinclair convulsed, his lower body dropping to its knees.

The creature forced a hand through Sinclair's bindings. Sparks collected at its fingertips. A low buzz filled the air around them.

Sinclair threw himself to the ground.

The creature fired, the shot flying wide overhead. Sarah Jane ducked beneath the blast. She hurried back toward Nat.

"Sinclair!" she called. "If there's four of these creatures here, that leaves three more life signs from your first scan!"

"Quite correct, Ms. Smith," Sinclair called back into the room. His top half extended, swirling around the hallway. His midriff remained wrapped around one of the creatures. "One moment, and I'll scan for their location. No matter if they've moved or not, more information is always an answer."

"What's so special about the other three life signs?" Nat clutched Sarah Jane's wrist.

"If whoever these creatures are took Josh, it's for a reason. They've kept him alive long enough and I can't imagine that changing now."

"I've got the trace! They're fifty feet below us; then twenty more toward the south. We'll have to get back into the tunnels to track them down. I'll work on locking down the signal."

"We can start by heading back the way these creatures came!" Nat called out. "Jacob, Danny, could you keep

these four occupied until we push further down?"

"Oh sure," Jacob grimaced. "I'll play 'em a round of canasta and see how it goes from there, huh?"

Sinclair's top half snapped back into place. He continued the motion, loosening his grip on the creature.

His midriff snapped forward.

The creature stumbled away. It aimed its arms back toward Sinclair, two purple beams crackling through the air.

Sinclair snapped back into human his human proportions.

The beams flew through the space his head had just occupied. They smashed into the hallway's ceiling, directly above Nat.

A circle of energy seared through the wood. The ceiling crackled, burst with dark flame.

Nat looked up to see a chunk of wood the size of a small car dropping down.

She forced herself forward.

The ceiling crumbled to the ground. The fluorescent chairs cracked open. Wayward shards of plastic bubbled, melting in the heat.

Momentum pushed Nat forward. Sarah Jane rushed over to her.

"We can't stay here," Sarah Jane said. "It's too dangerous, and I've already lost one of you today."

"I'm fine, Sarah," Nat snapped, turning toward the tumult across the room. "But you're right. Sinclair, do you have enough of a trace for the other life signs?"

He ran over toward them, Debbie following close behind.

"I do. In fact I should be able to trace these four creatures' own path through the catacombs down here. Jacob and Danny are doing a fine job keeping these four off of our backs for the time being, and I think we'll leave them to it."

"The pair of us can keep you both safe," Debbie added. "You head for where these creatures came in. I'll turn us all intangible until we're out of harm's way."

Sarah Jane nodded. She gripped Nat's chair, and the four inched closer to the edge of the hallway.

Sinclair slipped in front of them, warning them back from the threshold.

A dry crunch sounded from across the room. The creature sealed into the floor snapped one arm upward. Shards of concrete jutted from its body. It curled over, breaking away chunks of the floor as it rose back to its feet.

Jacob cast his arms wide, charging across the breadth of the room. Two creatures struck his arms. He wrapped himself around them both.

Danny blitzed across the room in the opposite direction. Reaching down, he snatched up one of the remaining creatures.

The fourth and final figure, still riddled with concrete, followed Danny's path. His arms aimed for the boy. He fired. The beam swerved away as Jacob barrelled into him.

"Now," Sinclair called to the others.

He rushed toward the far left corner of the room. Sarah Jane followed, pushing Nat with her.

Debbie ran in time with Sarah Jane. One of her hands reached out toward Sinclair. The other remained low, marking an invisible line through the other two women.

A tunnel opened out in the corner of the room. The same regular, floor-

level lights marked a path downward, before swerving toward the left.

"Get inside, all of you," Debbie said. The three of them did so. She paused in the entryway, turning back toward her teammates. "Be careful, boys," she murmured, before turning back into the tunnel.

"Given the energy traces of those creatures, I've charted a path leading directly to your friend," Sinclair said, turning to Sarah Jane.

"Good. Thank you," she strode along, keeping Nat level with Sinclair. "Now at last we can get back together with Josh, and perhaps finally start to understand what on Earth is going on here!"

A vast, lone sun burned in the place of the starfield.

The rows of computers lay dead. The myriad of hums that characterised such central control hubs had been consumed by a single screen.

Gordon's atomic logo stared blankly across the room.

"…for a while, but now that we're further down, problems have begun to arise."

The voice echoed from the hallways outside.

"You said something about tracking a unique cosmic radiation," another voice; a young woman. "That might work anywhere else, but from the sound of it, this whole area should be utterly irradiated. It'd be like trying to make sense of static."

"Exactly. After the first push in this direction, scanning for cosmic radiation became pointless. Since then, we've been following the trace of what I can only hope is your friend. I promise you both, though we have our own goals here, Debbie and I shall do all in our power to—hold."

A moment of silence.

A small creak of metal by the doorway. The shuffle of feet huddling together.

Sinclair's head curled across the entrance. It turned, scanning the room. He paused at the main screen, his eyes narrowing.

"The coast is clear."

His head poked further into the room. His body followed shortly after, with his neck slipping back into place.

Nat followed moments later. Sarah Jane and Debbie strode in behind her.

Sarah Jane's eyes widened. She sprinted past Sinclair, diving into the rows of computers.

"Josh!"

The boy slumped back in his chair. His arms fell limp by his side. His head lolled back, eyes closed. Dark burns marked his jacket, wisps of steam rising from his shoulders.

"Josh, can you hear me?"

Sarah Jane knelt down beside him. She pushed two fingers into his neck. Her other hand went to squeeze one of his own.

"A pulse," she turned to Nat. "He's still alive. Thank God."

"But what on Earth happened to him?" Nat ran her fingers across his shoulders. "Is this what those things upstairs can do to living creatures?"

"Almost certainly." Sinclair stood by the end of the row of computers. "Though it defines mine and my family's very existence, there's still so little we know about this radiation. The first point of data I learned on the subject in decades, I discovered just now. While the area is doused in cosmic radiation, those creatures are like a nexus for it.

Walking avatars, if you will."

"You mean…" Debbie's hand hovered over her chest. "That could have been…when we…"

"I'm afraid so, darling," Sinclair took her hand, squeezing it. "It seems we had more luck than we first thought. Perhaps with only a few more moments of exposure, those creatures upstairs may have been our own fate."

"And this place…" Debbie murmured. "It's been soaking in it for so many years…"

She stared at Josh's body.

"It doesn't matter. We've already let one person get hurt. Wondering about what might have been is as useful as doing nothing at all."

"I agree," said Nat. "I want to get some of these computers working. Judging by the screen, this room still has power. I'm more use with a keyboard than I am anywhere else."

"A feeling I often share," Sinclair added. "I'll see about getting some of these computers working. Whatever data we find should be an information goldmine."

A low, elongated croak escaped from Josh's lips.

Sarah Jane started forward. Debbie rushed to his other side.

"Can't…" he rasped. "D-Didn't …SJ…"

"It's alright," Sarah Jane said. "It's alright, Josh. Nat and I are here. You're safe now."

His head rolled toward Sarah Jane. A harsh, dry chuckle passed his throat.

"Hiya." He took a long breath. "Don't worry. I couldn't check the fence, but I found my own way in."

A small grin cracked across Sarah Jane's lips. She lowered her head, shaking it slowly.

"Hello." He rolled toward Debbie. "Don't think I've met you before…"

"I don't think you have, dear." She lay a hand on his burnt shoulder. "My name is Debbie. You must have been through so much, but we're going to keep you and your friends safe."

Josh nodded.

"Now then, Josh," Sarah Jane started. "I know you're tired, but you were right. Something is happening here. A lot more than just two people vanishing. Tell me, if you can, how did you get down here? Did you see what hurt you?"

Gordon's insignia twitched.

Josh looked to the screen, and closed his eyes.

"No. Sorry."

Jacob launched his fist forward.

A blast of gold light filled his vision, and his punch struck empty air.

"Hey, genius!" he called out. "You ain't exactly being a team player here!"

"Relax, big feller," Danny replied. "When some walking gargoyles start stealing your gimmick, I'll let you take the lead!"

He swerved across the length of the vast, prop hallway. One of the glowing, purple creatures hung from his hands. The creature's own arms stuck straight up, its body weight pulling the rest of it down.

A cacophony of dull thunks marked each bright pink chair slamming into creature's torso.

Sparks built up from the creatures fingers. The constant battering of chairs masked the steady hum of increasing energy.

Two dark beams smashed upward.

Danny fell limp as he crashed

through the hallway's roof. His gleaming body went dull. Flesh and blood filled the space where he had once been living light.

"Dan!"

Jacob leapt on top of the hallway. A low crunch echoed through the entire chamber.

Danny's body hung in the air. Hails of wooden splinters scraped across his body.

He barrelled across the length of the ceiling, each footstep causing the wood to screech in complaint.

A hail of laser beams swirled around him from below.

Fire sparked around Jacob's feet. Slabs of wood crackled down to the lower floor. Ruptures broke across the length of the ceiling.

The hallway crumbled. Shattered fragments of the ceiling fell away. The walls collapsed inward.

Jacob leaped up. He reached out for Danny's limp form. The boy's hand twitched.

A purple vortex exploded around them.

Light blinded Jacob once again.

Josh squeezed his eyes closed, jaw clenched tight. He hissed, bunching his hands into fists. Releasing his breath, he fell back into his chair.

"Josh, please, give it a minute."

"SJ, I'm fine. I swear. I can't do anything just sitting around moping."

"Clearly you're not trying hard enough. I spend all day sitting around."

"Thanks. You've got an excellent bedside manner, has anyone told you?"

"I thought you were alright?" Nat's lips twitched into half a smirk. "Sinclair, how are you doing with the wiring?"

"I should be just about finished. What I'm looking at down here is quite remarkable. Nothing should work in the slightest, not even the large screen up there. Everything is ever-so-slightly incorrect, as if half-remembered. Interesting."

A hummed chorus filled the room. Each computer snapped to life at once.

The screen twitched. The insignia fractured.

"That's it. It's all on," Nat called down. "Now, finally, time to get something done."

She nudged forward, fingers twitching across the nearest keyboard.

A puddle formed on the cracks between floor panels. It grew steadily, a white mass stained with black. As it expanded, the black stains formed the same atomic logo on the screen. Stephen Sinclair oozed from beneath the floor, steadily reforming into his human shape.

"That must be something to get used to." Sarah Jane looked toward Debbie.

"No more so than being able to walk through walls." She raised her eyebrows. "Or fall through the floor if you let your thoughts wander too much. We all have something that we live with, dear. The first thing to understand is that it's not to be feared."

Sinclair took a breath, running a hand down his fully-formed chest. He turned, taking a seat at the machine beside Nat.

"You were right on those passwords," she said. "Are you sure you've never been inside this base before?"

"Not physically, I assure you," he

gestured to the vast screen. "That was the first hint I found since we arrived. My little excursion into the wiring just now confirmed it. Not only is our old capsule still here, it is somehow the foundation of this entire base. Inside the walls, everything is built almost exactly as I constructed it all those years ago."

"As if that was the original blueprint?" asked Sarah Jane. "Just extrapolated out?"

Nat shook her head.

"No. That wouldn't explain the passwords. Or—" An atomic insignia burst onto the screen. "Whatever this thing is!"

"Oh, I remember that!" Debbie's face lit up. "His name is Gordon. Stephen named him that after—"

"After Flash," he chuckled.

"He'll save every one of us," Josh mumbled, lips narrowed.

"Exactly. He was the original computer interface for the space ship. Programmed to control whatever Jacob couldn't fly. We did grow fond of him during the early stages of the mission. Oh, it must have been horrid, tucked away all these years on his own."

"Perhaps," Nat tapped the desk. "But if he's been functioning even barely, all while still being connected to the ship and this energy of yours…he might have an understanding of your radiation."

Sinclair nodded, tapping away at the keyboard. "Perhaps things would be a little easier once I get the voice interface online. One moment…"

A few more taps, and he leaned back from the computer.

"Gordon? Hello, old friend. I'm sorry we've left you this long."

"Dr. Sinclair…?" the two voices rose from a long hiss, eventually settling at a recognizable speed. The main screen twitched. "And the young Ms. Grey. I trust you're both here to continue the mission?"

Sinclair's lips tightened.

"I'm so sorry, Gordon," said Debbie.

"I'm afraid you have quite a lot to catch up on. We'll be sure to get you up to speed shortly. But for now, you've a new mission, overriding all others. If you recall when we last met, during the rocket test?"

"The unsanctioned rocket test. I do remember. Colonel Brik's concerns about the ships shielding have been noted, and appropriate changes have been added to the blueprint for your next prototype."

"That's not really a worry right this moment, I'm afraid," Debbie said. "We need to know everything you've learned about the cosmic radiation that hit us on the flight. Every little thing, from the moment it hit us, until now."

"I quite understand, Ms. Grey—"

"Also, it's Mrs. Sinclair, now." Her lips curled at the edges.

"Ah. Congratulations to you both. Now. The mission. Data should be coming out on the units in front of you, Dr. Sinclair."

"Thank you. It's good to see you again, Gordon."

"Data's coming through now," said Nat. "Just giving it a quick skim before doing anything more intensive…oh my word."

Sarah Jane tucked herself behind Nat, glaring at the screen. "What is it, what have you got?"

"This radiation…it's more than just waves of energy. It seems to be borderline alive. Gordon's detected a pat-

tern of low-level activity within the radiation itself that I can only really describe as, well, psychic."

"But not only that, this psychic trace somehow seems to extend across the entirety of its spectrum. Too weak to do anything on its own, but concentrated together…"

"Perhaps it's symbiotic?" added Sarah Jane. "Not enough to survive on its own, but it seems to thrive once it's got something to build off of. Look at this base! Give this energy a broken spacecraft, and add a few years, and it can produce all this!"

"And that's not to mention our powers," said Debbie.

"That's it!" Sinclair snapped his fingers. "For years, I've believed it was the radiation that produced our powers—that it had changed us in some way—now we know the reverse is true. The radiation exists within us, yes, but in just the right quantity that our most basic thought processes control it."

He stretched out his arm. The bicep widened, splitting into two. His hand folded into the space, twisting into a double helix.

"Right now, I'm subconsciously telling the radiation, still lingering in the atoms of my body, to form the shape of DNA. Basic, human thought, transposed onto reality. Imagine the power this radiation must have in its pure form."

"We don't need to imagine," Sarah Jane's face fell. "I've just remembered where I've seen those creatures before. God, how could I forget? I should have cottoned on a little sooner…"

"What's the problem, SJ?"

"Nat, do any of Gordon's files say anything about 'Helix Energy'?"

"I'll have a look, hold on."

"The Mandragora Helix," she continued. "He was right. He said it would show up again around this time. Of course, it's been so long. Stupid woman."

"Ms. Smith," Sinclair began, raising himself above his computer. "You sound as if you've seen this radiation before, or at least, its effects. I don't mean to interrogate you, but anything you know would help us further understand this situation."

Sarah Jane looked between them all. She nodded.

"Once. A very long while ago. The Mandragora Helix is an intelligence, lurking in the depths of space. It doesn't even have a body. That'll be the psychic trace hidden in the radiation. The last time it came to Earth, it was so afraid of what humanity might accomplish, it tried to consume us all. It offered power to a small handful of lunatics. Eventually it gave them exactly what they asked for. So much that they lost themselves. Those creatures from upstairs. That's what your energy looks like in its purest form, Sinclair. I'm sorry."

Josh's lips tightened. The room fell quiet, outside of the computers' electronic hum.

"Gordon?" asked Nat. "I'm trying to search for 'Helix Energy.' For some reason that search term has got restricted access across the board. It's locked in something designated the 'auxiliary database.' I'd try to crack it open myself, but I don't think we've got time."

"Absolutely, Miii—" Gordon's voice froze on a single note. One voice cut out, leaving only the lower grumble. "Identify."

"Oh, yes. You'll need something for voice recognition, wouldn't you?" she cleared her throat. "My name is Nat. I'm a friend of Dr. Sinclair's."

"And I'm Sarah Jane Smith," she chimed in. "Also a friend of Sinclair's."

The screen hummed.

"Sarah Jane Smith," the lower voice gurgled.

"It isn't supposed to do that, is it, Sinclair?" Sarah Jane asked.

"Not quite, no."

"Sarah Jane Smith…"

"Gordon…" Sarah Jane began. "That's it! He's the one behind everything! Helix Energy needs a separate intelligence in order to give it purpose. When you collided with it, a part of it must have bonded with the ship. Gordon's been driving every bit of development here. The tunnels, the disappearances, even the whole base itself!"

"But why?" Debbie asked. "What good does an air base serve? Or that strange hallway in the underground hangar?"

"Honestly, I haven't the foggiest." Sarah Jane glared at the vast screen. Gordon stared back out, the insignia unmoving. "But at least now we know what we're up against."

A sharp buzz filled the room.

"Uh…SJ…" Josh began. "I think we might not want to be here anymore."

The far wall glowed purple. The concrete warped, twisting as if it was Sinclair's flesh. Two vast bulges grew from the wall.

Perfectly in time, they narrowed, growing more solid shapes. A crack reaching up from the floor formed a pair of legs. Arms pushed out further, clenched fists pressing against the distended concrete.

"Yes, Josh," she began. "Good observation. Can you walk?"

"I can try."

He grabbed onto Sarah Jane's arm. She gestured for Debbie to grab his other. The pair of them dragged Josh to his feet.

"Okay, scratch that. I can stand. You might have to do some walking for me."

"Sarah Jane Smith!"

The sound was barely legible as a voice. Every syllable crackled, scraping through Gordon's speakers.

The growths in the wall exploded. Purple steam gushed through the room.

Two more of the glowing creatures stood, staring at Sarah Jane. The rupture behind them knitted itself closed. Moments after their appearance, it was as if they had always been there.

"The two remaining life signals!" Sinclair slapped his forehead. "I was so distracted, I—I'm sorry, Ms. Smith. All of you."

"I think it's obvious who they're after," Nat said. "Sarah, get out. I'll stay here and keep trying to crack these files."

"Got it," Sarah Jane backed toward the door. "Debbie, with me. Josh is coming with us."

Debbie nodded, following Sarah Jane away from the creatures.

They both raised their arms. Sparks built around their hands. The hum of building power melted into that of Gordon's screen.

Two beams of energy blasted across the room, directly into Sarah Jane.

Debbie screamed.

The wall behind her burst into

flames.

Sarah Jane's mouth fell open. She glanced at the creatures, down at herself, then across to Debbie.

The woman had bent over, clutching her leg. Ragged gasps passed her lips.

"Can't…do that…again…" she gasped.

"Debbie, Ms. Smith," Sinclair called. "Get out of here this instant!"

"But…what about—"

"It's Ms. Smith they're after. I'll keep Nat safe. I know you can do the same. I trust you to reach the bottom of this, Debbie. You and Ms. Smith. Reach the bottom. Now go!"

Both his arms extended out toward the creatures. He wrapped himself around them both, jolting them sideward. They collapsed onto each other. Dragging themselves back upright, they pounded their fists against Sinclair's flesh.

Sarah Jane led Josh and Debbie to the door.

Debbie turned, glancing at Sinclair before following them out.

Sinclair watched them leave. He counted to five, biting his lip as the creatures continued to struggle.

Finally he lifted them both up. Scraping their heads across the ceiling, he dropped them by the doorway. The creatures stumbled to their feet. They stared at Sinclair, then to Nat.

A low rumble echoed from Gordon's scream.

The creatures turned to follow Sarah Jane Smith.

A screech rang in Jacob's ears. A pinprick of light shone, cutting through the murk.

"Kid…?"

He shook his head. Counting to three, he heaved himself up. A blanket of rubble slid from his body. Charred hunks of wood, crackling with purple cinders, toppled to the floor. Lumps of concrete fell to dust as they rolled away. A nest of larger remains lay huddled around him.

"Kid!"

He rubbed the back of his neck. Dust floated down onto him, and he glanced up. Light poured into the room through a vast hole in the ceiling, almost fifty feet away. Flaming shards of wood fell down around him. The molten remains of a bright pink chair clunked down five feet away.

"How big is this funhouse, anyway?"

Jacob clambered from the wreckage. He picked up a burning board, snapping it into the shape of a torch.

"Hel—help!"

The voice was small, echoing through the darkness. Jacob twisted, pushing his torch in every direction.

"Help me!"

"Danny, is that you? Keep talking! Don't stop!"

"Wh—who are you?" the voice asked. Jacob turned to the direction of the sound, and trudged toward it.

"Don't worry. My name's Jacob. I'm the guy that busted your upper floor just now. How do you feel right now? Anything broken?"

"No…no, I…I'm…"

The voice fell away into a gurgled scream. Jacob dashed forward. He swung his torch through the murk. The debris thinned out, revealing another blank, concrete floor.

"Hey! What happened? You al—"

A dim purple glow glimmered ahead of him. He slowed to a shuffle,

giving a low grumble.

A pair of booted feet twitched at the torchlight's edge. Jacob held up the light.

A suit of leather armour, the same as worn by the creatures, lay on the ground. Its gloved fingers quivered, locked in place by tensed muscles. A faint glow emanated from the edges of its jacket. Lone wisps of steam curled around its wrists. It gave off a low, wet cough.

"H—help me…"

Jacob's mouth fell open. His arm dropped, the torch clattering to the floor. The light snuffed out.

Wayward strands of light encircled a man's head. A purple stain crept up his neck. It clawed at his jawline, its surface glimmering. His eyes bulged, following the circle for a moment, before twitching toward Jacob.

"Please…M—my name is…H—Hayes…I—I…"

"Woah, woah, settle down," Jacob sighed. "It's alright, big guy. You're gonna be alright."

Hayes gave a scraping, pained laugh.

"Perhaps…not now…j—just…had to come here. *To serve the Helix.*" He screamed, frozen hands slamming into the ground. "I can feel it…I was right…but still wrong. All of us. All wrong…and it will destroy us."

"Hey, Hey." Jacob lay a hand on Hayes. The stone hand dwarfed the man's own. "Nobody's getting destroyed unless I give the say so. We'll get you outta here, Hayes. I'm Jake, by the way. Glad to meetcha."

Golden light burst through the chamber. A gleaming figure stumbled from beneath a pile of rubble. Jacob waved over to him.

"Hey, kid, how are you looking?"

"I'm okay," Danny winced, calling back. "I'll walk it off."

"Better get on over here! We got us a man down!"

Danny slowly raised a thumbs-up.

"I'm sorry," Hayes gasped. "Couldn't control it. Nobody can control it…I—it's gone now…
distracted. Distracted by her. The Herald. But soon…soon…"

"Lay off it, big guy," Jacob turned back toward him. "I'm gonna get you up and outta this dump. This Helix thing has a lot to get through before it hurts you again. Yeah, sure, you were shooting lasers at us a second ago, just put that down as a bad first…impression…"

He trailed off, looking past Hayes.

A vast, hollow drum filled the room. The thing loomed above them, the apex of its curved shell standing forty feet from the ground. A cast-iron web weaved around a wooden inner skin. Scaffolding jutted out, around the drum's entrance. A small platform clung to a central axis. Inside, it looked just like the hallway upstairs. Dull grey, with perfunctory splashes of colour. Computer banks had been bolted to the inner layer. Basic furniture, tables and benches, were built from the structure of the 'room' itself. A short staircase led inside the centrifuge, inches from where Hayes lay.

Danny arrived at Jacob's side. He squeezed his hips, stretching backward with a wince.

"I walked it off. I'm alright."

"You sure? Last I saw you got hit real bad. Not to mention the—"

"I'm alright."

Jacob looked at the boy, then down to Hayes.

"Alright."

The air quivered with a distant buzz. Jacob spun on his heel. A purple beam shot down from the hole in the ceiling.

Hayes screamed.

He flew backwards, crashing into the drum. Grey paint smeared, cracking off as he scraped against it. Jacob knocked into a computer bank and slid to a halt.

A cluster of three purple lights fell down to the lower floor.

Hayes clawed at his neck, his every breath an anguished howl. The circle of light around his face solidified. Purple mist rose from his collar. He fell still. His clenched hands loosened, falling by his sides.

Danny looked between Hayes, and the three approaching creatures. He closed his eyes, sucking in a breath.

The drum creaked as Jacob pulled himself up. He gripped the computer bank, ripping it from the floor. He stomped toward the encroaching horde.

"Now we're really stretching the idea of first impressions."

Hayes rose to his feet. His false face stared at Danny. He turned toward Jacob. One arm raised, sparks playing at his fingertips.

"Okay," Danny sighed. His own fist shimmered into golden light. "Let's go, round two!"

A circle of desks curled around the room's centre. Twenty-four computers stood around it, equal distances apart. In the absolute centre sat Nat. She spun in place, looking through the mass of information. Sinclair strode between the various machines. His body stretched as he moved, snapping back into shape as he caught up with his thoughts.

"What's this base made out of?" she asked.

"Every inch of cable and concrete has been extrapolated from my original craft. That's the blueprint. If I looked hard enough, I'd likely find the back of my hand buried somewhere in these walls."

"No, I mean, what's it *made* out of? Let's say Gordon really did build this whole complex. He'd still need materials. Copper cables, concrete, bright pink chairs. How is it that this room is physically here, right now?"

"That's a good question…" Sinclair's torso extended between a pair of monitors. He reached out to the wall. His fingers fused into a single, sharp point. He jabbed the concrete, letting the loose rocks fall into his other hand.

"I'd rather you didn't do that, Dr. Sinclair," said Gordon.

"Ah, you're back, are you?" Nat hummed. "Promise not to try killing us this time?"

"Nat, was it? Killing any human being would be detrimental to the mission. Allowing such a thing would be quite a black mark on my record."

"The mission?" she looked to Sinclair.

"My main project, back before all this," he nudged the two computers further apart, laying the chipped concrete between them. "We were to be the first human beings in orbit. The first to touch the stars. I suppose it was a total success, in the end."

"I repeat, Dr. Sinclair, notes have been taken from the unsanctioned space flight experiment. I believe the next attempt shall have a much higher

execution rating."

"But why not wait a little longer?" she began. "Not to say you were stupid, but there was so little you could have known at that point. Why not just wait for the go-ahead?"

Sinclair gestured to the mess of concrete.

"Gordon, please give this material a thorough scan. Relay the results to Monitor Eight."

"Coming right up, Dr. Sinclair!"

He sighed.

"I've asked that question every day, Natalie."

Her lips tightened.

"I was afraid. There's your answer. Young, foolish, and afraid. Everything, even human progress, was a race for survival. I had heard tell of a handful of Soviet scientists working in my field. Now, I would reach out to Russian scientists, speak with them. I would help them. So much has changed in the world, now that the Wall has fallen. Back then…all I saw was what someone, particularly the Soviets, would do with unfettered access to space. I felt the future was vanishing before my eyes. Of course, I needed a crew. A trusted pilot. A second pair of eyes. I knew nobody better than Jacob and Debbie. I still don't. Only Danny comes close. I learned a valuable lesson that night, Nat. The only lesson."

"What?"

"Survival isn't enough. We need kindness and care, as well, and launching early showed none of that to the best people I knew."

The monitor next to Sinclair lit up.

Nat moved to read it. Sinclair leaned across.

"Oh. Well," she blinked. "You wanted to know what enough Helix Energy looked like."

"The whole thing…" he murmured. "This entire base—everything—molded from raw Helix Energy. No wonder the scanner thought the place was saturated. We're almost literally swimming in it! But the quantity needed in order to maintain this entire base…it must be catastrophic. Built up over decades. How on Earth can Gordon keep track of it all?"

"Maybe I could give you an answer if I could break into this so-called 'Auxiliary Databank,'" she pushed herself back, turning to a computer opposite. "None of your old passwords work. It's like this is the only original thing in the entire digital architecture."

"Keep working on it, Nat. Now we know the extent of what's happening here, we know we're on the right—"

The entire complex shook.

The desks quivered. Sinclair's concrete sample slipped to the floor, crumbling to dust.

"…What was that?" Nat whispered.

"Nothing good," Sinclair answered. "Keep going."

Jacob's head fell to his chest. His arms splayed out, wide. One leg jutted out to the side. The other curled back, digging deeper into the wall. Above him rose a web of cracks. They extended up, halfway to the ceiling.

He fell forward, his body peeling away from the concrete. A muffled grunt rumbled in his chest as he hit the floor. He lay still for half a second.

Slapping his arms down, he dragged himself back into the room. With a jolt, his foot broke out of its hole. Chunks of stone and concrete toppled to the floor around him. The

cracks dug further into the wall, spreading out from Jacob's silhouette.

From twelve feet away, Hayes turned to face him. Sparks pulsed across his fingertips. He raised both arms, taking aim.

A golden figure slammed into the ground between them.

Purple light blasted from Hayes's outstretched arms. It struck Danny's torso. He juddered back, heels digging into the ground.

"Nuh uh," he hissed, fists clenching. "Not doing that one again."

He forced his own arms forward. Gold light ate away at the purple. Hayes' beam retreated back toward him, launching his body into the air. Danny turned to Jacob. He reached down, yanking at his stone hand.

"Come on, gruesome," he said. "You're letting yourself go here. I've got so many hits in while you took your little power nap there."

Jacob looked up at him, dragging himself to his feet. "My heart's not in it, kid. Might not look it, but one of these guys was talking to us a minute ago."

"And now they're shooting at us."

"Not wrong with that one. Still. These guys seem a little tougher than normal, but I don't wanna just smash them until they don't get up anymore."

A shadow fell across them.

A boulder of concrete, five feet across, sailed through the air toward them. Three lasers struck the rock, and it burst into purple flames.

Jacob knocked Danny to the side. He shoved his feet down, leaping into the air.

One grey fist smashed forward.

The rock shattered. Broken cobbles fell to the ground.

Jacob slammed back down, his other fist hitting the floor.

"Keep 'em busy," he shouted. "Steve is probably gonna burst in here any minute with some harebrained plan. Until then, it's just a friendly little bust-up."

Danny nodded. He sailed into the air, arms pushed forward.

"Keep 'em busy, huh?"

He swooped down, plucking one of the creatures from the ground. It flailed in his grasp, trying to aim its hands upward. Danny rushed forward, letting go of its wrists. Momentum pushed the creature on. It flew into the drum, slamming into a futuristic dining table.

"How about we give these guys a little spin-dry, rock man?"

"Now there's an idea!"

Jacob stomped forward, picking up another creature. He held it above his head, turning toward the drum. Purple light oozed from its entire body, steam rising from Jacob's hands.

"Hot one huh?"

He rushed toward the drum. After five long steps, he threw the figure away. It landed just off-centre, rolling to the curved floor's bottom.

"Figured you'd need a wash. That monkey suit of yours must need changing."

Danny threw a third creature in after his comrade. He flew back around, circling the room.

Hayes stumbled to his feet, climbing from a pit in the ground. Jacob walked over, looking down at him.

"I'm sorry, big guy."

He grabbed the dazed creature. Throwing him over his shoulder, Jacob lugged him toward the drum.

"We're gonna figure this out. I'm

gonna make sure you all get out okay. We're gonna get whatever this 'Helix' joker is for doing this to you."

Jacob tossed Hayes into the drum.

"But right now, I've gotta make you stop trying to kill me."

He rushed around to the drum's right side. Danny followed, floating ten feet above him. They grabbed a hold of the steel supports that wrapped around the construction.

Danny flew upward, straining at the metal bars.

Jacob heaved, pushing the entire drum around its central axis.

It began to spin, counter-clockwise. The creatures stumbled. Two fell on their sides, rolling along the rotating floor. The others scrabbled at the ground, reaching for a handhold.

Danny pushed forward. His body sizzled with light and heat, filling the entire, vast chamber.

The drum spun faster. A long, low whine escaped its central axis. The creatures rolled along its curved floor, bumping into the props layed out on its edges.

The whine reached higher into a screech.

With one final heave, Jacob launched the steel frame upward.

The axis snapped. The drum hopped into the air. Danny yelped, shoving himself away.

It hit the ground, a thud echoing through the entire chamber. It rolled across the ground, pushed by the spin.

Metal screamed as it hit the wall. The metal struts around the drum howled as they folded into themselves. Each bar collapsed, snapping into the drum's inner skin. The outer rings crumpled, snapping away to the sides.

A concrete roar joined the other sounds. The wall ruptured, bursting out from Jacob's silhouette. Cracks ran across the width of the wall. Chunks the size of cars fell away as the cracks multiplied.

The ceiling collapsed onto the drum.

A vast, black tube, the remains of the hallway, slid down from the upper level. It crashed to the ground. Splinters exploded from the base, the shattered prop crumbling into the ground. With a final squeal, it rolled backward, clattering onto the remains of the wheel.

Danny slowly floated down beside Jacob.

"Whoops."

A chunk of dirt fell from above. It slammed to the ground in front of them. They glanced at each other, then up at the ceiling.

A pinprick of sunlight shone down. The low rumble of cracking concrete sounded in their ears.

"Get 'em out." Jacob said.

They rushed toward the wreckage. Another wad of dirt hit the floor.

A list of random turns lead Sarah Jane, Josh, and Debbie deeper into the base. Each corridor formed the base of a network of branches. Each possible turning broke into three more possible paths. Each choice presented the same identical, blank walls, with dim lights marking the floor.

"I know it's probably hard to tell, seeing as we're on the run from a pair of light-up goons that can fire lasers from their hands," Josh began. "Not to mention how everything in this place looks the same. But does anyone else feel we're going in circles."

"We aren't taking random turns,"

said Debbie. "We're looking for the ship. As Stephen told us, we have to get to the bottom of this. The further down we go, the faster we can unravel this mess."

"Yeah, but that's exactly it. We're going down, but still managing to walk in nothing but a big circle. Every time we get deeper, it just brings us back up a few hallways later."

"I've noticed that too," said Sarah Jane. "I thought it may have just been me getting disoriented underground, but no. We're being toyed with."

They paused at a crossroads.

Debbie tapped her foot, catching her breath. "These creatures chasing us. They're just like mine, or Stephen's abilities, but on a far bigger scale. The same must be true of the base around us. It needs direction, and surely that means it can change as Gordon wills it."

"In that case, how come we aren't just being crushed between wall panels, or dropped into a huge pit? Bit quicker than boring us to death."

"Because underneath the Helix, he's still just a computer: a very sophisticated idiot. He can't end a human life—that's the first law of robotics. If we can tell Gordon that he's harming people, even that on its own might stop him."

"Good plan, but apparently those creatures are also being driven by Gordon, and they sure don't have a problem with trying to kill us. And, I say again, we're running around in circles. Eventually, they're going to track us down."

"But Gordon isn't driving these creatures," said Debbie. "It's this thing. This Helix. Perhaps they are both connected, and they're almost certainly helping each other, but this thing is evil. It's playing the puppet master. Those things are under its control just as much as Gordon is."

A low, rumbling vibration ran through the entire hallway. The floor lights flickered. A wave of darkness rolled through the underground web. Dust shook free from the ceiling.

"What was that?" asked Josh.

The vibration grew into a roar. A screeching scream echoed through the junction. The corridor's walls twisted, the floor tilting over. Ruptures burst across the walls. Dirt spilled through the cracks. The two hallways on either side of them rolled around the central crossroads, rising and falling by an inch.

Ahead of them, the corridor melted. Its wall panels crumpled, folding into themselves. Dirt and rock filled their place. The furthest reaches of the corridor vanished into darkness. Ahead of them stood a bare, rough tunnel, hewn from the ground.

"Hello…" said Sarah Jane. She took a step forward. "You know, Josh? I think I've just realised something… whenever—"

A gleaming, purple arm exploded through the floor. It latched onto the wall and dragged itself up. A second arm burst through. Purple mist spilled out, glowing from below.

The silhouette of a man bulged out from the opposite corridor's wall. Its head jutted forward, piercing the concrete. The creature twisted, turning its blank face toward Sarah Jane. A crack split down the wall from its head, its arm breaking free.

It took aim.

Debbie rushed forward, knocking Sarah Jane and Josh into the mud.

The beam flew over the crossroads, smashing into the wall above the other creature.

Sarah Jane crawled further down the tunnel. She turned, leading Debbie and Josh down after her. Wiping her hands, she climbed back up to her feet.

"That's it! That confirms it. Whenever those creatures fire their energy at us, no matter what it hits, it never leaves any real damage."

"I…Oh!" Debbie's jaw fell. "That's right! That fake corridor broke, but only when it doing so would hurt one of us!"

Sarah Jane picked up a handful of dirt. It slid through her fingers.

"Look at this, Josh. First real thing I've seen all day. The walls; the buildings upstairs; even that hallway, Debbie. It's all the same. Just Helix Energy squeezed together. Now something has broken that energy apart…"

She turned, striding down the broken hallway.

"Let's go dig up a spaceship."

Debbie and Josh looked at each other. Fire crackled in the hallways behind them.

Sarah Jane led on.

"Oh my God!" Nat slapped her forehead. "I've just had an incredible thought!"

The screen before her displayed an endless list of red text. A uniform block ran across the entire height of the screen.

Access Denied.

"Well, quickly, what is it?"

She turned to Sinclair, her eyes wide.

"Who cares?"

"Excuse me?"

"Who cares what's in this auxiliary database? It doesn't matter. Knowing won't stop this alien invasion. It certainly won't stop us dying in the next few minutes. We've had the answer all along, but we've been too stupid to see it!"

She began tapping on the nearest keyboard.

"I'm writing a disconnect code for the database," she said. "No matter what's in it, Gordon is going to pull every plug he can. Every little scrap of data on Helix Energy is going down the drain."

"Miss Nat," Gordon began. "The auxiliary drive contains all collected data on the subject of Helix Energy. As this subject is of particular interest to Dr. Sinclair, I highly advise you to stop—"

"No," Sinclair's mouth fell open. "It's far more than that. Gordon, I want you to perform a full system analysis. Highlight any and all files created since my last login."

"I—I…I understand, Dr. Sinclair."

"He seems a lot more eager to help than he was when Sarah was in here," Nat mumbled.

"That's because whatever caused him to act so aggressively isn't focused on us," Sinclair strode over to another monitor. "It's why those two creatures had no interest in the two people who should be at the base's weakest point. Gordon is in need of saving as much as anyone here, Nat."

"Actually, that is one small problem. As far as I can tell, Gordon's the only thing keeping this base upright about now. And—"

The room quivered. A thud echoed from elsewhere.

"And given how things are going, I don't even know how long he can

manage that. We'll need to find some way to keep the corridors open until everyone can get out."

The monitor gave a small ping.

"Aha! As suspected, that auxiliary database is more than what we've thought. It's the Mandragora Helix itself. Notice how the only new files in Gordon's main drives were the ones created since our arrival here? Everything he's done since the crash has been to serve the Helix. Nothing else. The creation of this base is all down to that. It's been stretching, Nat. Testing its power."

Nat tapped out a few more lines of code. She paused, eyes narrowing.

"Testing…oh! Hold on!"

"Another incredible thought?"

"Your powers look like you're just stretching yourself, don't they? But it's not just that. It's direct matter manipulation. Alright, the matter is just that of your own body, but that's the basis of it."

He nodded.

"Then think of Jacob. Isn't it weird how almost every surface in this place is concrete? Then there's Debbie and her brother. We've seen those creatures pull off pretty similar feats to the pair of them since we arrived."

"You don't mean—"

"There's a reason your powers are like they are. You're not just carrying the Helix around with you, you were a proving ground!"

"I—no. I refuse to accept that. Every action I've taken since the crash—every action my family has taken—"

"—Has been yours. I'm not going against that. What I'm saying is, you've got the Helix inside you, and you're not being controlled by it! Quite the opposite in fact! It's acting as if it's ready to conquer the world, but you've been conquering it for decades!"

"Which means that, once we've got Gordon free, we can keep the base standing until everyone is safe! I just need a direct link to the Helix, and I can mold the entire complex to however we need it."

"I—hm," she tapped her lips. "Well. Probably not you."

His jaw clenched.

"I can't let you bear this responsibility, Nat. Nor this experience. As you say, I've been controlling matter at the atomic level for years. But at first, I could barely hold my own body together. Having this be your first brush with the concept…your mind may tear itself apart. If the Helix doesn't do it first. I'm sorry, but I can't allow it."

"Sinclair, you've already got Helix energy running through your veins," Nat folded her arms. "You might be used to that sort of latent energy, but all I can see is a booster rocket for the Helix itself. I'll do it. I'm clean, fresh as a daisy. The moment we're all out, I can unplug myself. And hey, if it gets down to it, there's not much good the Helix can do when it can't even climb up stairs."

Sinclair looked down at Nat. His fists clenched.

He sighed.

"Let's begin."

Black metal formed the end of the tunnel.

It stretched completely across the mouth of the cavern. Blank. Less than featureless. No dust clung to its surface. No rocks lay around it. Even the dim light from the base's corridors

refused to shine off it. It simply was.

The three of them slowed as they approached. A rumble sounded behind them. The sound grew into a roar.

Sarah Jane stepped toward the black. Her mouth drooped open. Her brows furrowed and unwound like a confused seamstress. She reached one hand out toward it.

It hovered in the air.

"Must say that doesn't really look much like a spaceship," Josh said, his voice dropping into a faux upper-class accent. "If you ask me, of course."

"Alright, Josh," Sarah Jane murmured. "You're allowed to be scared."

She turned away.

"Ms. Smith…" Debbie trailed off.

"Yes, Debbie, what have you—? Oh…"

Two recesses stood on either side of the black. Both seemed just wide enough for an adult to stand in, stretching up the full height of the tunnel. The dirt clustered around their edges, obscuring their view until they drew near.

Inside both stood a pair of vast, clear jars, both filled with a murky, green liquid. They sat atop a pair of glowing metal altars, dug into the tunnel floor. A string of lights stretched around the top of the altars. On the left jar, they pulsed red. The right jar gave a steady, bright green. A tangle of cables led away from them both. They burrowed through the dirt, vanishing into the tunnel walls, inches from the black.

A baby sat suspended in the jar to their right. It stared out through the glass with milk-white eyes. Both legs folded across each other. Its arms jutted out before it, swaying apart as the jar's liquid swirled.

"What is that?" Sarah Jane whispered.

"I've no idea," Debbie said. "It doesn't have anything to do with the crash, I can tell you that. I think I would remember…oh, I can't look at it. I'm sorry."

"It's alright," said Josh. His voice lowered. "Don't blame you really."

"Oh, God, no…" Debbie raised a hand to her mouth.

A second child curled inside the left jar. While the first had only small, unfinished limbs, this had only a pair of vestigial legs. Its bloated head masked any arms it may have had. It leaned against the glass, its eyes closed.

Sarah Jane's lips narrowed. She glanced at her feet.

"You know what those are," Josh whispered. "Don't you, SJ?"

She stared at him.

"It's horrible," said Debbie. "Who would do this? Why would…? What would bring somebody to this?"

"The Helix," Sarah Jane answered. "That's what. I never saw anything like this last time it was here, but…"

She turned to the black.

"If Sinclair is right, then your ship should be right here."

Debbie nodded.

"I'm guessing this wasn't here either last time you—"

"No."

"Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to be a door. You might have to push us through, Debbie."

"Okay. I can do that. Not to mention, those two creatures might still be after us. If they come this way, looking for us, I'll stop them."

"Are you sure you'll be alright? I wouldn't want to leave you—"

"I'll stop them, dear."

"Okay." She turned to Josh. "Let's go."

"Let's go what?" asked Josh.

"We're going in," said Sarah Jane.

Debbie sucked in a long breath. She took a hand from both of them.

"Good luck to you both." Her eyes closed. "Go."

Sarah Jane strode forward, into the black.

Josh paused.

Her hand poked through the threshold, reaching for him.

He took it.

A vertical horizon split his view.

Bright pinks dripped across the right side of the sky. The left was filled with fluorescent yellow. The colours merged and shifted from pink to green to orange and back to yellow.

Yet behind them all hung the black.

Ahead of him, he saw Sarah Jane. She fell through the vortex, dragging him behind.

Into infinity.

Light gave way to darkness.

Josh collapsed to the floor.

Sarah Jane knelt down beside him, one hand on his back.

"Josh…" she spoke into his ear, yet her voice was muffled.

"I…"

Light and colour danced through the back of his eyeballs. An incessant hum rang in his ears. A tremendous pressure fizzed inside his head. He clenched his fists, clawing at the metallic floor.

"Wh—where…h—how long has it been, since…?"

"Josh," Sarah Jane repeated. "Listen. Focus on the words I'm saying. Josh. Slow down, or you're going to start hyperventilating. Oh, I told you not to follow for a reason…"

"Had to…had to look…look after…"

"Of course," she murmured. "You would come to your senses just to throw yourself into danger. You wouldn't be you, otherwise."

"SJ?"

She reached down, brushing her fingers against his wrist.

His breathing slowed. He pawed at her arm, gripping it tight. His other arm reached over her to squeeze her back. Together, they stumbled to their feet. Josh clutched at Sarah Jane. Sarah Jane grabbed onto the wall.

A dim chamber, only five feet wide, extended out before them. Metal covered every surface. Shining white chrome covered the walls. Unpolished steel made up the floor. Three glass windows were built into the front of the chamber. Compacted dirt filled the view, crushed so tight it seemed pitch black at first. Only then did Josh notice the incline. Somehow, the entire chamber stood at a thirty degree angle, with the front pointing down toward the ground.

Rivets buried into the floor marked out the locations of four chairs. Mere inches from where the chairs would end, a control bank jutted out. Ancient, dust-covered dials and switches littered the bank. A handful of LEDs flickered red. A small screen, barely larger than Josh's hand, lay in the centre.

Gordon's atomic insignia quivered on the screen.

"Gordon?" Said Sarah Jane. "Is that you? Can you hear me?"

"You." A deep voice gurgled from

the control bank. The atom's electrons spun on the screen. "You."

The atoms froze. Another voice sounded from the controls.

"Ms. Smith," said the voice. "Welcome. Your guest profile has been created, and you may find temporary credentials at the base reception."

"I think we've gone a bit beyond that."

"You have certainly made yourself at home. As you're a friend of Dr. Sinclair's, I won't call security just yet. However, I'll have to take action if your being here endangers the mission."

"The mission…what is that exactly?" Sarah Jane asked.

"The specifics, I can't reveal. I do apologize. I recognize your connections, Ms. Smith, but you are still a civilian."

"Well," Josh coughed. "How about a few broad strokes, if it's so important?"

"Our original function, as you may surmise, ended with a temporary setback," Gordon's screen flickered. "I once sought to bring Man to the stars. Now I—Now I—Now I—"

Gordon's voice ceased.

"Gordon?" Sarah Jane stumbled forward. She stood before the control bank, hands hovering over the mass of switches.

The insignia crackled. The gurgling voice returned.

"The stars shall come to man."

Another quake wracked the computer room. Six monitors toppled to the floor, shattering on impact. Four more hung on the edge of their desks. The broken plastic melted into the concrete, dissolving into less than dust.

A coronet of cables wrapped around Nat's head. Two tiny screens covered her eyes. A headdress, cobbled together from spare parts, sat around her forehead. Wires extended out from each of the remaining computers, linking up to Nat's helmet.

"You know I'd feel much more comfortable in your place, right now?" said Sinclair.

"Well, unfortunately, you aren't. So that's not too high on the encouragement scale, I'm afraid."

He nodded, knowing she couldn't see.

"The final severance command is ready to go," he said. "Once I hit enter, the entirety of the base is going to be running through your head."

"I know. Again, great encouragement."

"It's not going to be fun, and we both know that. I'm sorry, but I'm not going to lie to you. Just know that I'll be right here. If you can hear me once the command goes through, I'll do all I can to help you through this."

Nat nodded.

Sinclair reached out a hand, his arm stretching across to hers.

"You won't be alone," he said. "If I can do nothing else, you won't be alone."

He pushed the button. Nat squeezed his hand.

Glass crunched. Debbie swivelled on her heel, one hand raised toward the sound.

The right jar stood in ruins. Shattered remains of the outer wall lay around it. A viscous, green liquid oozed through the cracks, drooling down to the floor.

Its former occupant hung in the air

before her. Veins and arteries drew themselves onto its translucent skin, filling with blood for the first time. Its vestigial limbs stayed in their former positions. The legs curled against its chest. The arms jutted forward, fingers barely brushing against each other. Pure, white eyes stared out from beneath misty eyelids.

A silent breeze swept through the cramped chamber. Warmth crept along the length of Debbie's spine.

She nodded, and held out her palm. Her fingers twitched toward the black.

The child's head bowed, almost imperceptibly. It turned away.

The black stood, watching.

The child hovered forward, into the black.

"So, I suppose I'm addressing the Mandragora Helix, now?"

A static gurgle sounded through the capsule.

"It's been a while, hasn't it? Clearly you've been lonely, out there in the depths of space. You just can't seem to keep any friends, can you?"

All shall join the Helix.

"Ooh, yeah!" Sarah Jane frowned at the screen. "If you call another cult of wayward loonies 'friends.' I'm sorry, but I've been through rather a lot since we last met. You'll have to try a bit harder before you start getting anywhere."

The Helix hissed. Its small screen on the control bank flickered blue.

Still…you miss the wider picture…Sarah Jane Smith.

"You know what? I was going to be calm throughout all this. I know exactly what you are. I don't need to get angry at a parasite like you, I thought. Well. It seems I can still disappoint myself, given the right circumstances. What you've got just outside. Those two little jars of yours. Tell me about them."

You cannot comprehend our—

"No."

Josh felt a low vibration in the air.

"Don't you dare…don't you *dare* give me that. I know exactly what those things are. They're the people we came here to find. Perhaps I don't quite understand how you managed it, but that's what I'm here to find out. My name is Sarah Jane Smith. I am a journalist. I ask questions, I find answers, and I know when I am being lied to."

"Um, SJ…?" Josh crept forward. "Perhaps it's not exactly wise to rile up…this?"

A dry chuckle escaped Sarah Jane's lips. She folded her arms, a cold smile cracking her face.

You face only a fragment of Mandragora. The barest microcosm of our power has come this close to humanity's ascension.

"You call that a step forward?" She snarled. "You call the utter perversion of two human lives an ascension? I am this close to being done with you. I could stop you from anywhere on this base. I would find a way, you know. No matter what it took, I would rip this entire complex down. The only—the *only*—reason I am still here is because I want to hear it from you personally."

All shall serve the Helix.

"Tell me their names."

Josh sucked in a breath.

All shall be one with the Helix.

"Tell me their names."

The Helix is eternal.

"Michael Archer…" said Josh. "Richard Lake…"

Sarah Jane turned, her frown softening. "What?"

"I—I don't know," he said. "I just…it popped into my head. Just felt I had to say it. Not sure why though…"

The screen fizzed with static. Gordon's insignia vanished into the monochrome haze. The work here is accomplished. Mandragora's incarnation shall walk this world. It shall clear the way for the Helix. It shall spread, on and on, across the stars! Herald of the Helix!

The air fell still.

From the black mass at the rear of the chamber, came forth the child.

It moved toward Sarah Jane. Blank eyes stared through her. Its young hands reached out toward her.

"…Hello," she said, turning to face it.

It stared at her. Its head bowed.

In the face of death itself, thought Sarah Jane, *you sought only life.*

A rush of air filled her ears. She turned to Josh, eyes widening.

"Josh, we need to leave."

"Eh?" He looked between the child, and the Helix's screen. "But—what?"

"Josh. Out. Now." She strode toward the back of the ship, grabbing his arm. "Don't turn around. Don't look. Just get out, quickly."

He stumbled after her, pawing at his hand.

Every atom sang. Every element of the craft, its interior, even the dirt outside, began to rotate in perfect time. The sounds inched toward a harmony. The child raised its arms.

Darkness filled his sight.

He fell out onto a vast, grey plain.

A yellow sky hung above them. Grey clouds warped, twisting around themselves. The sun blazed on the horizon.

Crags of rock reached up around them. They raked the sky, jutting from the earth like overgrown claws. At the base of the crags stood a cave. Two mouths faced each other, sand spewing out from both. It collected in a vast pit in the centre of the plain. It was in this that the pair of them climbed to their feet.

Behind them stood a vast monolith. It reached up to the heavens, and down to the earth.

Nat screamed.

Josh scrabbled to his feet at the sound. His head snapped left and right. He peered into the cave mouths. Three humanoid shapes crawled out from the darkness. Crimson stripes marked their chests. Josh scurried backward, bumping into the monolith.

Movement from the other cave mouth caught his eye. A vast, grey figure, dragging another man with crimson armour, emerged into the light. Another, younger man walked beside him.

"Nat?" Josh shouted. "SJ?"

"Up here, darling!" A blonde-haired woman called from above the caves. She watched him turn to her, before vanishing back over the rocks.

Josh rushed to the wall, jamming his foot into the rocks. He dragged himself up. The rough stone scraped over his hands. He fell forward, onto the cave's roof.

Nat lay in a small pool, just out of sight of the monolith. A mass of bandages covered her face. Copper strings dug into the cotton, stretching out into the water. Sinclair knelt beside her, Debbie's hand on his shoulder. Sarah Jane knelt opposite. They clutched her

hands in their own.

"SJ!" Josh darted forward, staggering to his feet.

"Oh, Josh," Sarah Jane took one hand from Nat, and squeezed Josh's wrist. "Thank God you're alright. I told you not to look. When we got out, you had completely passed out. If it weren't for Nat keeping this whole environment stable, I wouldn't have left you."

"Wh—what?" His brow furrowed. "B—but what about the ship? The…the baby?"

"Nat has allowed a tremendous burden to be placed on her mind," said Sinclair. "She is learning now how matter works. How molecules fit together. How atoms collide and interact. She's maintaining this entire environment, and she's the one who brought us all together."

"It's alright, Josh," said Sarah Jane. "It's over. For you. Me too, probably. It's just all down to Nat now."

A frightened gasp passed Nat's lips.

"Shhh," Sarah Jane hummed. She ran the back of her hand across Nat's bandages. "It's alright. We're almost home."

A choir of atoms sang from the monolith. The noise filled the air, vibrating through Josh's entire being.

"Almost," Sarah Jane gestured to Debbie. The woman walked around Nat, taking her hand from Sarah Jane. "All we need to do now is make sure the Helix is completely gone. Not stopped. Not imprisoned."

She rose to her feet, leading Josh back toward the edge of the rock. The Crimson Chapter crawled toward the monolith, their bodies glistening purple. Jacob lay against the rock face, with Danny collapsed on his front beside him.

"It's over now, Helix," she called. "All the years you've wasted, sitting here in your own little world. I hope you've had enough, because I will not be happy to see you back."

The universe groaned.

Molecules scraped against each other. Waves of energy writhed through the air. The monolith stood, unwavering, as the forces of creation howled around it.

And in its splendour, the universe sang.

"You thought you'd managed so much," said Sarah Jane. "You had such a well-thought out set of ideas. You tried to manipulate everything you touched, and look what it got you? Nothing. Less than nothing."

The members of the Crimson Chapter knelt around the monolith. They reached out their hands, pausing inches from its surface.

"You tried to infect Debbie and her family. They didn't even know you existed. They've defeated you constantly for decades. Poor Gordon, despite how much you put him through, still managed to survive. He never once bought into your manipulations. Even these—"

She gestured at the Crimson Chapter.

"You thought you could use them as your faceless puppets? Well now look at them."

Each man laid their hand on the monolith. The ethereal symphony reached a crescendo.

"You wanted these people so badly, and they wanted you. Now you're getting just what you wanted, Helix. Energy squared. A feedback loop.

Enough to send you right back to where you came from."

Cracks burst along the length of the monolith, spreading out from each man's hand. Gold shone beneath the black. They drew closer, laying their other hand on its surface. Two men leaned forward, bowing their heads against it. One kissed its flawless shell, tears streaming from his eyes.

Purple mist rose from their bodies. It crept along the edges of their flesh, vanishing into the monolith.

The cracks grew further out. The monolith vanished beneath a cloying, golden web. One man fell away, eyes flickering closed. The sand beneath him swept away, revealing a mass of cracks in the earth itself.

Creation ruptured.

Josh fell back. The universe vanished.

Darkness gave way to light.

A blue sky peered through the canopy. The light shone through the leaves, a warm glow flooding the ground nearby. Directly above him, the sky yanked the trees apart. A long, blue gash cut into the forest. The trees on either side fell away, leaning back into the forest.

Josh lay in a mound of dry dirt. He pawed at the ground, grabbing a fistful of mud. He squeezed it, feeling the soft mush slip through his fingers.

Footsteps clomped toward him. Without moving, he glanced in their direction. Sarah Jane wandered into view.

"Hello, you," she smiled, reaching down for his hand. "How many times have I had to get you on your feet today?"

"Enough, if you ask me." He pulled on her arm, dragging himself up. "Next time I'll be flawless as usual. No rescuing required for me."

"Sure." She giggled. She wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "None whatsoever."

A gorge in the ground mirrored the break in the trees. Earth had been cast aside, like a giant spade crashing through the woods. The rupture narrowed as they walked deeper into the woods.

"I know I've said this a lot recently, but, uh, what exactly happened back there?"

"Ah, yes," she lead him away. "I might not be the best person to explain the specifics, really. But one thing's for certain. The Helix is gone. Any trace of it has left Sinclair's ship. Even the surrounding area is reading clean."

At the end of the gorge sat a spaceship. It jutted from the ground, nose buried in the earth. Dirt and dust covered its white outer hull. Roots wrapped around one of the directional fins. The other had vanished completely. The dorsal fin stood at twice Josh's height, even with the very top bent and broken off.

A door hung open on the ship's left side, marked with a worn and chipped atomic logo. Sinclair's legs poked out underneath the door. His body stretched into the ship's interior. Debbie stood just behind him.

Five feet away, Nat slumped in her chair. Her arms flopped out to both sides, head drooping against her shoulder. She sucked in long, weary breaths.

The approached the door.

"Afternoon," Josh said.

Sinclair's upper body retreated back from inside the ship. He peered

around the door, a smile on lips.

"Ah, you're awake. Excellent."

He slammed the door closed, and the four of them came together.

"Josh was wondering about some of the specifics, Sinclair," Sarah Jane said.

"Ah, well." His grin cracked wider. "Nat and I realised that the base in its entirety was little more than a dream given form. What looked and felt like concrete, wood, or metal—it was all just Helix Energy. By pulling apart Gordon and the Helix, we managed to take control. Nat created an environment that allowed us to all come together. All of us, even the Helix. From there, it seemed Ms. Smith knew just what the situation needed."

"Helix energy can't survive on its own," said Sarah Jane. "Bring enough of it together, with nothing but itself to sustain it. It launches the Helix right back home to Mandragora. That's what happens when you're consumed by a single idea, Josh. It's never enough. With the Helix gone, the base could no longer sustain itself. The area popped back to how it was way back when."

The air rumbled, a roar calling through the trees. The Quintessence Quartet's gleaming white aircraft soared along the ravine, slowing to a halt ten feet away from the crashed ship. It floated down to the ground, hissing as the engines wound down.

The left pod burst open. Danny flashed out into the air, landing between Debbie and Nat.

"And that's the last of them," he said.

"Last of whom?" said Josh.

"Who, Josh," Sarah Jane grumbled. "How many times…"

"The Helix has vanished from this area," Sinclair began. "But those six men who allowed themselves to be consumed by it…I had to bring them in for some observation. Initial readings seem fine, but if any side effects begin to manifest, I'd rather it be somewhere we could help them."

Josh nodded, his mouth narrow.

"And what about—"

Nat snorted from her chair.

"Nat took an incredible amount of Helix Energy into her mind," said Debbie. "I can't begin to imagine the toll it might have had. She saved our lives, dear. Without her we would all have been trapped in an endless maze of corridors. Broken apart. Helpless until the Helix managed to pick us all off."

A weary grumble rumbled up through Nat's chest. She sniffed, one hand blindly pawing at her face.

"Wh—where…?"

Sarah Jane and Josh walked over to her.

"Afternoon, stranger," Josh grinned.

"Shush…" Nat grunted. "I've got one hell of a headache, let me tell you."

"Glad to see you're making a smooth recovery," Sarah Jane chuckled.

She gave a soft whine, rubbing her eyes with one hand.

"Congratulations, Nat," Sinclair stepped in beside them. "You surpassed even my own expectations. Thank you."

"How's that for survival, then?" She gave a weak grin.

"For kindness and care, outstanding," He took Debbie's hand, looking down at her.

"You guys done being sappy over there?" came a gruff voice from the ship. Jacob sat cooped in his pod, arms folded. He tapped against his arm with one finger.

"Alright, old friend," Sinclair called. "One moment."

"Seems this is goodbye for now," said Sarah Jane.

"It does, too," Josh added.

"It's been wonderful meeting you," Debbie said. Wrapping her arms around Sarah Jane and Josh, she gave a soft squeeze. She turned, planting a light kiss on Nat's forehead. "Well done. All of you."

She nodded to Sinclair. Turning to the ship, she walked away. Danny walked beside her.

"If you ever need us, Ms. Smith, I can—"

"I'll hunt you down," Sarah Jane nodded. "Thank you, Sinclair. We've both tied up some old loose ends today."

She reached out a hand. Sinclair shook it.

"Goodbye, Ms. Smith, Josh. Farewell, Nat."

Nat blushed, giving a small wave.

He turned away, walking to the pod. The three of them stood alone.

"And that be that," Josh said.

"Quite," said Sarah Jane.

The Quintessence Quartet's aircraft floated into the air. It hovered over toward them, pausing above the crashed ship. Lines burst out from the underside. They dropped to the floor, hissing as they hit the older capsule. The metal ropes melted into the ship's hull, bonding with the battered steel.

The craft rose up, and the old ship rose with it.

Chunks of dirt and rock fell into the hole. Wood snapped as a directional fin slapped a nearby clutch of trees. A slab of metal fell from the ship. The outer door crashed to the ground, jutting out from the dirt.

It continued on upward, breaking above the treeline. Both ships sailed away, over the horizon.

Sarah Jane gave a small wave. Her hand flopped down to her side.

"Right!" she began. "I think we'd all better get home, before any authorities decide to investigate whatever happened here."

"Good idea," Nat added. "I'd rather not have to try and explain how to build entire landscapes just from your mind. They wouldn't have a big enough blackboard."

Sarah Jane chuckled, pushing Nat's chair toward the far end of the ravine. Josh stood, staring at the door.

"Coming, Josh?"

"Yeah…" He wafted a hand at them. "Yeah, don't worry."

Kindness and care, he thought.

He turned to the shrinking figure of Sarah Jane, then back to the door. The faded, atomic insignia stared at him.

And she did it without even knowing. Without realising.

Sarah Jane Smith will save us all.

He turned back, and trudged after the others.



5. FAMILY

Gifts for Good

M.H. Norris

Sarah Jane had to admit that as she'd gotten older, she'd developed a bit more patience. Whether it was from years of journalistic stakeouts or years of putting up with the Doctor's more…eccentric behavior, Sarah Jane was proud at how she had become rather patient.

Well, until this afternoon it seemed.

She'd been promised an afternoon at the theater. When that was suggested, she thought they'd be going to the West End to see whatever show was popular these days. Instead, she found herself very far from where she'd like to be. Still in the theater district, yes, but blocks away from the big theaters—looking at psychics.

Fake psychics, of course, as psychics aren't real.

And she didn't understand why she'd been invited.

In the lobby, she was surrounded by kids ranging from pre-teens to college, with a few adults sprinkled in. They were talking—some girls squealing at obnoxious levels—and she'd lost sight of Luke and Clyde. Rani was nearby, going over some assignment with one of her classmates.

A group of kids were laughing at something, or someone. She made her way over. There were few things she hated more than bullies—it didn't matter whether they were human or alien.

"Look, Smith! Your mummy is coming over to defend you." One of the rather large boys jeered at her. "Do you need her to defend you? It's not like you have anyone else. Even Clyde had a dad, even if he took off after one day."

Sarah Jane tried to get to Luke, but couldn't get past some kids, something she was fairly certain was intentional.

"Now see here."

"Leave him alone, Travis!" Clyde shouted.

When a cheer of *fight fight fight* broke out, she feared the worst.

"Now, I think that's quite enough," a familiar, commanding voice inter-

rupted. Sarah Jane made her way over and let out a sigh of relief when she saw Alistair standing there, his glare effectively silencing the crowd. “There are families here trying to enjoy an afternoon out, and you boys decided to have a brawl?”

Some had the sense to look ashamed. All of them avoided eye contact. Luke was looking away from Alistair, head down, hands in his pocket. It was a side of him that Sarah Jane wasn’t used to. Normally he was a bright, confident boy.

Had she been that oblivious? Sure, she’d known he was bullied when he’d first started. She’d debated letting him start as soon as he did. But he wanted to, wanted to try and be normal.

“Hello again, Luke, Clyde.”

“Brigadier.” Luke’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes and he still didn’t look up. “Thanks for inviting us out to see Mimir.”

“Though it seems weird, you wanting to see the show.” Clyde held out his hand. Sarah Jane got a good look at him, and hoped that she didn’t see a bruise forming. “A pleasure, sir.”

Alistair turned to her. “Miss Smith, it’s a delight to see you again. Thank you for humoring an old man and coming out for the afternoon."

Sarah Jane hugged her old friend. “Alistair, you’re not old, just experienced. But, speaking of humoring you…why am I here?”

“Can’t I invite an old friend to take in an afternoon matinee?” He gave her a knowing smile.

“You could, but we both know this is all just smoke and mirrors.”

“Oh, come on, Sarah Jane. It could be fun.” Clyde gave her a smile, wincing slightly. That was definitely a bruise forming on his chin.

“Why are we here?” Joining them, Rani looked around the theatre. People were still trying to get in past the security at the entrance. “No offense, but this doesn’t seem like something you would be interested in.” She paused, eyeing Clyde, and reached out to fuss over his bruise. “Did you get into another fight? Clyde, I thought we talked about this?”

Clyde winced.

Alistair reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out several tickets. “We’d better hurry in if we want to take our seats.”

He handed tickets and Sarah Jane took hers, eyeing it. “I hadn’t even heard of Mimir before you asked me about it.”

“We had. Kids at school are talking about them,” Clyde chimed in as they stepped in line.

“People claim they’re really psychic. That they predict what’s going to happen.”

“There’s no such thing as psychics. They probably look people up. This theater only holds about a thousand people. They pick a few patsies out of the crowd based on what names they can find online. Take a guess based on their social media profiles and digital footprint. They’re rolling the dice. Mr. Smith is doing some digging on them; he does agree that they’ve been unusually accurate about their predictions. Or, rather, deductions. So was Sherlock Holmes, and he didn’t pretend to have any powers beyond observation and research.” Sarah Jane stepped through the metal detector and let someone scan her tickets. “Even their names imply that they are going off probability as opposed to predicting

anything."

The theater was decorated in more of the same: dice were all over, some Norse symbols sprinkled about, crystal balls were mounted on the banisters. It looked like children decorated it, honestly.

The rows of the theater were fairly wide, something Sarah Jane appreciated. After a certain air duct, she wasn't a fan of small spaces. Sometimes her hips still hurt when she looked at tight places.

The lights flickered, signaling the show was about to start; people seemed to pick up the pace trying to get to their seats. Alistair led them towards the back of the theater before taking a seat.

"You are correct," he told her. "It's not as though this sort of thing is new. People have been doing this throughout human history."

The curtain opened and around her, people applauded and cheered. Sitting on the stage were four large dice blocks.

A low beat started. The audience picked up on it and clapped to it.

"Ladies and Gentleman, prepare to be amazed and roll the dice with Mimir!"

Four figures stepped through the dice and waved to the excited crowd.

"Welcome everyone!" A woman stepped up. She was wearing an long coat and had her hair done in a fancy updo. "I am Galatina, and welcome to the show. These are my friends Leo, Orion, and Lynx. We are going to go on an adventure with you this afternoon and explore…what if."

Sarah Jane snorted. That earned her a look from everyone in her party. "I once met someone named Lynx."

"With a mutual friend of ours?" Alistair asked.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Seemed to have the sort of name for it."

The dice rolled back and the four separated across the front of the stage. A man who barely looked to be out of college stepped up.

"Chance is all around us! What could happen? What might happen? We ask ourselves these questions all the time. The future is unknown."

"Unknown to most." Sarah Jane muttered under her breath. Alistair motioned her to quiet.

"Let them do their bit."

"I still don't understand why you dragged me to this. If you wanted to catch up you could come over for tea or we could meet somewhere—anywhere."

"Shhh." A person next to her hushed them.

"Simply watch the show, I want to know your thoughts."

The four filed off the stage and made their way into the excited audience. Every so often, they would stop and talk, and ask them a couple of questions to "get to know them" before telling them what was probably in their future.

Leaning back over to Alistair, she added, "Honestly? There's nothing that would point to, well, anything that I usually deal with. "

"There's more to this than meets the eye, Miss Smith."

"I would have helped if you'd clued me in before dragging me to this."

"But then you would have made judgements before walking in. I wanted an unbiased opinion."

Sarah Jane turned to her old friend. "It's a bit late for that. I don't believe in any of this nonsense. Never have."

Before Alistair could respond, Lynx walked down their row and stopped by her. "Are you Sarah Jane Smith?"

"I am. And you're Lynx?"

He tipped his head in acknowledgement. "You're a journalist, correct?"

"I am."

"You've written about some amazing things. And seen even more, haven't you?"

Sarah Jane fought the urge to squirm. "I have. When you've been in this business as long as I have, it's a bit of an occupational hazard."

"And you've made lots of friends along the way, met others, traveled to new and, some might say, exotic places."

"I have. I've been lucky." She wistfully let her thoughts wander to a much younger version of herself.

"And you thought it all was behind you until recently."

"Life has a way of surprising you." Sarah Jane didn't like how close he was getting to things he had no way of knowing.

"And those people in your past? You have not seen some of them in a long time."

"People drift away."

He studied her for a second and looked around. "Perhaps, Sarah Jane Smith, you'll get a visit from an old friend soon."

"Perhaps I shall."

With that, Lynx walked off, stopping towards the end of her row to talk to a woman. Sarah Jane leaned back in her seat and played the moment back in her head. Her career, even that rather unfortunate bit in the 90s, was on the internet if you knew where to look. The rest could be guessed easily enough.

About five rows in front of her, Orion stopped by a woman who looked to be in her 20s. "Rachel Gladys?"

She nodded.

"I see a tall, dark stranger in your future."

"Honestly? I prefer my men to be shorter than me."

Orion walked away as the audience enjoyed a good laugh.

Sarah Jane lingered in the auditorium as the audience made their way out and into the lobby. Lynx's prediction had her feeling uneasy. Not that she'd tell the kids that.

She was avoiding Rani, if she was honest. The girl reminded her a bit too much of a younger version of herself. And one thing Sarah Jane knew for certain, once Rani caught whiff of something interesting, Sarah Jane was hard pressed to get her to let it go.

Ahead of her, Alistair was having stern words with Clyde about getting into a fight like that.

"It's an honorable thing to defend your friend, but sometimes rushing headlong into battle isn't the wisest course of action, Mr. Langer. You were outnumbered. A pyrrhic victory should be avoided until it cannot. Bullies—children all—fear adults. In this situation, that would have been to your advantage…" Struck by a thought, he turned to Luke. "Does this happen often?"

"Sometimes. I'm used to it. It's either they make fun of how smart I am

or they make fun of the fact that I don't have a dad. Everyone heard about how Clyde's dad was here—even if he left. It wasn't anything I couldn't handle."

"You still should have told me." Sarah Jane came and put her arm around her son. "You are the most amazing boy I've ever known."

"Hey!"

She shot Clyde a look but his grin told her he caught what she was doing.

"What do you think he meant by an 'old friend'?" Rani came up beside Sarah Jane. Ah well, she'd avoided her for a bit.

"Yeah, you don't have a lot of people visit you." Clyde came up on her other side.

"I have you lot over almost every day."

"We don't count." Clyde smiled. "Besides, I've only known you a couple of years."

"But people from your past. You don't talk about it a lot."

Sarah Jane looked at the young girl. "Lynx wasn't wrong, I've seen a lot and met a lot of people in my life. It's not a huge stretch to say I'll see someone again."

"You're not the least bit curious?" Clyde asked.

"Alistair?"

He and Luke paused and he turned back to look at her.

"Would you like to come over for tea tonight?"

"I'd be delighted." He turned back to his conversation with Luke.

"See." She turned to the two beside her. "Technically, that fulfills his prediction.

"It's a bit of a cheat if you think about it." Clyde gave her a look.

"Of course. That's all psychics are." Sarah Jane shook her head as they exited the theatre.

Luke and Alistair were waiting off to the side. "I'll follow you then, Sarah Jane."

"Sounds delightful. I'm warning you, I wasn't planning anything fancy, probably some take away." She eyed the kids. "If this lot have their way, I'll just order some pizzas."

"Either way, it sounds delightful. This way, we can talk."

Traffic felt pretty light on the way back to Bannerman Road and it felt like no time at all before she was turning onto the familiar road. Her phone rang and she saw that it was Mr. Smith.

"I'm almost home. Can this wait?"

"An alien vessel has landed in the attic."

"Do you recognize the craft?" Sarah Jane cut a turn tight, her tires squealing.

"I do not."

She pulled into the driveway and quickly threw the car in park. "I'm outside now. If anyone steps out of that ship, keep them contained."

Sarah Jane made her way to the front door, not wasting time getting her keys. Instead, she unlocked it with the sonic lipstick.

She paused in the entryway and turned to the eager children. "You three are not to come upstairs. Tell Alistair what's going on when he arrives."

Turning away, she started up the stairs but paused halfway up. "Stay. Down. Here."

Quickly she made her way up to the attic. She hated not knowing. She

liked knowing—she'd gotten pretty good at knowing what was going on.

And before Mr. Smith, she had her journalistic talents. Yes, she'd be thrown some curveballs, it was part of doing what she did. But at least she knew.

And they weren't in her attic.

She burst through the door and stopped cold. There was a person standing in a red containment field in the middle of her attic.

Taking a few more steps, she studied the man whose back was to her. His white curls, his velvet coat, and those frilly sleeves that she always thought were utterly ridiculous but always made her smile.

A man who shouldn't be here.

A man who had long since moved on.

He was taller than she remembered—not as tall as his successor of course, but taller than the stick thin one she'd met recently.

"Doctor?"

The Doctor turned around. A cross look vanished, and replaced by a smile that wove through some of her fondest memories. "Sarah. What are you doing here?"

"I should be the one asking you." She took a couple steps forward, pushing her emotions back. "After all, you're the one who landed your TARDIS in my attic."

The Doctor looked around. "This is *your* attic?"

"It is indeed. Speaking of." She spoke to Mr. Smith without turning away. "Mr. Smith, you can lower the containment field."

There was a second of disapproval from Mr. Smith, but the containment field lowered all the same.

That was all the prompting she needed to quickly close the distance between her and her first Doctor, wrapping him in a hug. He returned it and Sarah Jane smiled.

"Look at you." He studied her and Sarah Jane brushed her hair behind her ear. "What year is it?"

"2009."

He paused. "How are you? You look wonderful, happy."

"More relieved that my attic wasn't invaded by a *hostile* alien."

"My apologies, but you know I don't make a habit of home invasion."

"What are you doing here? Why are you here? Since you recognized me, I guess we've met." She peeked around him towards that wonderful blue box of his. "I'm not inside, am I?"

"No, no. You said something about going to visit your aunt for a few days while she was in-between lecture tours."

"So you went on an adventure without me?" She crossed her arms.

"It's not as though I planned on it. The TARDIS required my attention. She had been due updates for a while, as you know, or knew, and…"

"And how did tinkering in the TARDIS lead you to my attic in the future?"

He shrugged. "I was supposed to go right back. But someone or something yanked me out of the vortex."

"You took a trip without me?"

"It's not as though it's the first time, Sarah. There was that whole debacle in the Death Zone."

"That was different."

"Was it? You showed up then, and you've shown up once again."

"I hardly think him wandering off

without you is the most pressing of our issues, Miss Smith."

Sarah Jane turned to see Alistair in the doorway, an apprehensive smile on his face.

"And of course you'd be here. Why is it, Brigadier, that when I end up stuck on this particular planet that you are never too far away?"

"It's always a pleasure to see you as well, Doctor." He shook the Doctor's hand.

"What do you mean you're stuck?"

The Doctor let out a sigh. "There's quite a lot that goes into running the TARDIS, including telepathic circuits. Something has crossed those wires. Made them fritz out, to use a layman's term."

"That's definitely an old friend." Clyde's voice confirmed what she thought.

"What. Part. Of." She turned to see all three kids peeking in the door. "*Stay. Downstairs.* did you three not understand? There was an unidentified alien craft in this attic. That doesn't mean you can come up here because everything seems okay. You have no idea what you could have walked in to."

"You know, it's not exactly fair of you to lecture them on being where they shouldn't." The Doctor's tone barely held his laugh. "After all, I remember a certain young journalist breaking into a top-secret research facility."

"She did *what*?" Clyde laughed.

"It's not that surprising, she broke into the Bane's factory."

"And other places."

"Including my TARDIS." The Doctor smiled fondly and Sarah Jane couldn't help but return it.

"She broke into the TARDIS?" Rani laughed.

"Now, now. Let's not tell all my secrets, gentlemen." Sarah Jane tried to switch tracks. "Doctor, I'd like you to meet my son, Luke, and our friends, Clyde and Rani."

"Your son?" Several emotions crossed the Doctor's face before it settled on proud joy. "You really have grown up."

Sarah Jane nodded. "I adopted him a couple of years ago."

She turned to the kids. "This is the Doctor."

"This is the one you travelled with." Rani smiled and bounced up to him. "Rani Chandra."

"She really broke into your TARDIS?" Clyde chimed in.

"More accurately, she *snuck* in." The Doctor chuckled.

"Like she sneaked into my facility, posing as her aunt." Alistair looked at her. "Next thing I knew, she was the Doctor's new assistant."

"Clyde, Rani, if you two are staying for dinner you need to call your parents and let them know." She went over to her desk and pulled out her trusty folder of takeout menus. "And help us pick a place. It seems like we've got a lot of work to do."

Sarah Jane had outgrown fairy tales earlier than most. Growing up, her heroes hadn't been princesses who needed someone to rescue her. It had been Nellie Bly, Amelia Earhart, the ATA girls.

But, ever since she'd stepped out of the TARDIS for that last time, she'd always wondered what it would be like to have the Doctor come back. She'd gotten a taste of it, been invited to

travel with him again. If she was honest, she almost accepted but decided that it was best not to.

When Luke came along, and the others, she wondered what it would be like to have those two parts of her world collide. Now that it was happening, she had mixed emotions.

The Doctor was telling about her first adventure, spurned on when Clyde mentioned one of the members of Mimir was named Lynx. Alistair happily chimed in and Sarah Jane hadn't felt so at home in a long time. All the people she loved under one roof.

Which reminded her…

"Alright, Alistair, tell me why you dragged me to that farce of a show this afternoon."

"A show?" The Doctor leaned back in his seat. "Nothing wrong with a good bit of theatre."

"I wasn't the one to discover them. K…let us say, 'someone at UNIT' was the one who brought it to my attention." Alistair took a sip of his tea. "Apparently her new assistant mentioned it and she looked into it."

"Our encounter with our own Lynx to one side, tell me about this Mimir."

"They're this group." Rani leaned forward, that excited gleam in her eye that Sarah Jane was quite familiar with. "They've been all over the United States and they came to do a tour in the UK this summer."

"They claim to be psychic. To know the future and what's coming," Clyde chimed in.

"But, there's no such thing as psychics."

"At least not on this planet in this time period. And even then, it doesn't work the way you'd think." The Doctor leaned forward, the kids mimicking his motion. Luke leaned so far forward, Sarah Jane wondered how he was managing to stay on the couch. "While there's many races that are telepathic, some are temporally sensitive."

"Maybe these people *are* temporally sensitive," Rani suggested.

"Possibly, but unlikely. And a group of four masquerading as spiritualists?" The Doctor paused to think. "What did UNIT think, Alistair?"

"Apparently, there's not enough information there for UNIT to act. But they're sure there's something there."

"The name is interesting." The Doctor picked up his cup of tea. "Mimir comes from Norse mythology."

"Didn't accounts say that Odin carried his head around seeking his knowledge and wisdom?" Luke asked.

"Exactly right, my boy."

Luke beamed under the praise and Sarah Jane smiled.

"They've been accurate according to everything in the press, for what that's worth."

"That is correct." Mr. Smith interjected. "Mimir's gotten some attention for accurately predicting sports results. They received the funding for their tour with a Mega Million lottery ticket. They've also predicted the gender of several children, people who would later be in accidents, and various other things."

"That's a rather impressive computer you have there, Sarah."

"I am a Xylox, not a computer."

"Are you really?" The Doctor came up and examined the console. "I thought they had become extinct ages ago."

"I am the last."

Sarah Jane would be forever thankful that the Doctor's back was to her in that moment. Here they stood, both the last of their species. Except, the Doctor wasn't there yet. He wouldn't be for a long, long while. She bit her lip until she controlled her expression.

To him, home was just a quick trip in the TARDIS away, not that it was a trip he ever cared to make. He avoided his home, content knowing it was there.

Until it wasn't.

She cleared her throat and the Doctor shot her a look, but she waved him off. His occasionally short attention span got the better of him and he turned back to Mr. Smith.

"This interface is really impressive. Do you have any information on these so-called predictions?"

"Inconclusive. If you were to ask me about a specific person, I might be able to link them to Mimir, but asking me to pull random events and link them requires significant amounts of calculations. I would be better served with specific datasets."

"Of course. Something as a baseline to measure?"

"What about the day they won the lottery, Mr. Smith?" Sarah Jane got up from the couch and joined the Doctor by the console. "Can you pull up any records from then?"

"That I can do." He went quiet for a moment. "Here it is. In April 2006, the four who would become known as Mimir won a lottery. Apparently they split the price of a a few tickets with the hopes that if they won, they could take their street act to bigger levels."

"I would say they accomplished that."

"Mr. Smith." The Doctor leaned forward, resting a hand on the console as he studied the screen. "Can you do a reading of the area that they're from and see if any unusual energy readings came from the area around that time?"

"That may take some time, but yes. I will let you know when I have the results." Mr. Smith went quiet.

"Have a hunch?"

"Psychic energy would give off a signature that humans might not pick up in this decade. A few other things might too. Normally, I'd suggest that we hop in the TARDIS and go back ourselves, but whatever this is…is affecting her." He let out a huff.

"We stuck around Earth a fair bit when I was younger."

"Ah, but I had the option to leave, Sarah. The option, that's what's important." He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Now, you three." He turned back to the kids. "Who cares to tell me how you got involved in things—things that I know Sarah here says you're too young for."

"In her defense, she tells us that most every day." Rani smiled. "I got involved after the Pied Piper was trying to kidnap kids from the school. I investigated, found them, and the rest is history, I guess."

"Another young investigator?" The Doctor eyed the young girl.

"Rani works with me on some of my more normal pieces. She wants to study Journalism at University in a few years. I met Clyde around the time I adopted Luke."

"You know how it goes, you can't let being possessed by the Bane stop you from facing other alien species. Besides, Luke's my best mate, even if we're still working on his pop culture knowledge."

"And, of course, Luke." The Doctor turned, a warm smile on his face and Sarah Jane watched as Luke sat a bit straighter. "Are those your science books over there?" He nodded to where a pile of thick science books sat.

"Well, they're not what we're using in school, I just like to read ahead."

"A thirst for knowledge." The Doctor walked over and put his hand on Luke's shoulder. He turned and looked at Alistair. "I thought you were retiring?"

"I am. I did."

"Yet you brought Sarah Jane this information?"

Alistair waved his hand around the attic. "Miss Smith came to me a few weeks ago about getting something out of the Black Archive. Knowing she was still investigating, I know she could handle this. I'd rather it be someone like her than those people in Cardiff."

Before Sarah Jane could answer, the phone rang and she rushed over to her desk. "Smith residence."

"Sarah." Gita Chandra's voice came over the phone.

"Sarah Jane."

"Sarah Jane, is Rani over there?"

A quick glance at the clock told Sarah Jane how late it was. "Oh yes! Sorry, Gita. I'll send her home. We lost track of time, I'm afraid."

Sarah Jane hung up the phone with a sigh. "Rani, your mum wants you home. Clyde, yours is probably looking for you too."

Both groaned, but Sarah Jane held up her hands. "Tomorrow is Sunday and I'm sure the Doctor will be here still. I'm sure we'll still have something to investigate. And I'm *sure* the Doctor is willing to let you attempt to sweet talk him into telling stories about me."

That earned her a chuckle from the Doctor.

Two of the teens got up and headed for the attic door pausing to say goodbye to the Doctor, Luke, and Alistair before waving to Sarah Jane at the door. Alistair got up as well.

"I believe that I'm going to head home as well. I'm not as young as I used to be."

"None of us are." Sarah Jane took another sip of coffee, fairly certain she was going to be up for a bit longer. "I'll call you when we have something."

"Until next time, Doctor." Alistair held out his hand which the Doctor happily shook again.

"Always a pleasure, Brigadier." The Doctor smiled.

Sarah Jane walked over and gave her old friend a hug. "Next time, just tell me we're looking at suspicious potential alien activity."

"But where's the fun in that, Miss Smith?" Alistair smiled. "Luke, it was a pleasure. If you have any questions, let me know and I'll try and ask my…contact at UNIT if I don't know."

"Of course, sir." Luke beamed.

Sarah Jane walked Alistair down. "Should we be worried?"

"About the Doctor showing up?" Alistair paused by the front door.

"I…I'm not sure how feel. I know that not just anything can yank the TARDIS out of the vortex. Part of me wants to ship the kids to Maria's—if I thought they'd stay there and not bring her back in a quest to help."

Her old friend looked at her. "The Doctor usually is, if nothing else, ex-

cellent at getting out of messes. The people he cares about out as well. I say we trust our old friend and hope that those three listen to him better than they do you. Though, considering who Luke's mother is…"

"He's the one I'm worried the least about. Who knows what they'll be discussing by the time I get back up there."

"I wish you luck with that, Miss Smith. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Alistair." Sarah Jane lingered in the doorway as she watched Alistair get in his car and pull away.

Bracing herself, she headed upstairs to find The Doctor and Luke on the floor, both with pencils drawing various diagrams and surrounded by books using words that surpassed even Sarah Jane's large vocabulary.

She'd leave them to it, then.

The sun wasn't up when Luke woke. It wasn't a bad dream—he didn't dream—but rather a feeling that he needed to do something that drove him out of bed. He tiptoed past his mother's room, and headed to the attic. It was empty. But the TARDIS door was cracked open.

He couldn't resist. Not after all the stories he'd heard—stories about this wondrous machine, and some of the places his mum had gone with the man inside.

He stepped inside the box. Even though he'd know it was transdimensional, seeing it in person was a whole new experience. It was a bit mind blowing.

"What is it about you Smiths that drive you to sneak into my TARDIS at odd hours?"

Luke jumped as the Doctor walked in from one of the side room. "I'm sorry, sir. I just…"

"It's quite all right. I imagine you've heard stories from your mother." The Doctor chuckled. "That's fun to say. The time I'm in at the moment, she's less than 10 years older than you."

The Doctor stuck his hands in his pockets and looked at the door. Luke studied the wistful look on his face. "I like to think that the lives I touch are better after I'm gone."

"From what I hear they are."

"Your mother, she seems happy."

"She is. I think she was lost for a while, after you and her parted ways—but she won't talk about that. But something helped her find herself again and then she's found…I don't know what she found. Mum's good at knowing that I'm a bit more observant that most kids my age but I've heard things. They used to call her an Ice Queen—some still do."

Concern crossed his face. "Perhaps it's best I don't ask further questions about her…what happened to your friend? There was a bruise on his face."

"He was defending me." Luke looked away from the Doctor.

"From bullies?"

Luke nodded. "I get picked on sometimes because I'm not like normal boys."

Compassion crossed the Doctor's features. "Normal is never something one should strive for. Ultimately, I left home for it." The Doctor got down on Luke's level. "But normal in what way?"

Luke shifted, uncomfortable. "I'm adopted. I don't have any…they say I

don't have any real parents. And I don't. The Bane made me by—"

"I am aware of how they do things, intimately familiar one might say. Having no birth parent is nothing to be ashamed of, Luke. Personally, I think humans put too much stock in the idea. People are people, regardless of how they got here."

Luke looked back up at the Doctor, suddenly hugging him.

"I try to ignore them but today there were a bunch of them and one tried to knock me down and Clyde went at him and the Brigadier had to break up the fight."

"The Brigadier has always been good at that." The Doctor turned. "Hold on a second."

He disappeared down a hallway only to return a couple minutes later with a couple of foils and some protective clothing. "The sun's coming up; meet me in your backyard."

Luke scurried out of the TARDIS and hurried to his room to change. Putting on the unfamiliar clothing, he hurried downstairs to find the Doctor waiting for him.

"Your mother may kill me, but I think learning a bit of fencing is a rite of passage." The Doctor held up his foil. He moved gracefully with the with it, the tip hitting a tree.

"You are dodging your opponent. You have to be light on your feet."

For the next bit, the Doctor worked with him on his posture, on how to use the foil, and gave him encouragement. Sure, he'd gotten it from his mother, from Maria, Rani, and Clyde, but this was different.

Maybe this was how some of the kids felt with their fathers complimented them.

"What are you doing, mate?"

Luke turned to see Clyde coming in the gate. "What are you doing up so early?"

"We've got a case to investigate. Did you think I was going to sleep the day away and miss it? With *him* here?"

"Yes, actually." Luke smiled.

"Ah, Clyde, was it?"

At Clyde's nod, the Doctor handed him the foil, grabbing a long stick from under the tree and making a makeshift third. "You can join us."

"Good morning, Sarah." The Doctor looked up with a smile as Sarah Jane entered the kitchen. It was later than she would have preferred, but the boys weren't as quiet as they thought and she'd let herself go back to sleep once they'd quieted down. "We were just going over Mr. Smith's results."

"The Doctor was showing me how to use the energy signature we found to trace other similar anomalies." Luke pointed at the diagrams. Clyde was sitting next to them, the bruise on his chin a bit more obvious today.

"Your son is rather brilliant, Sarah. He's been a wonderful extra set of hands. And he and Clyde were excellent students this morning."

"We've been trying to trace instances with the same type of Arton energy that was in the area when the members of Mimir won their lottery ticket."

"Arton energy? They're time travelers?"

"No, it's not that kind, or, rather, it's not that cause." The Doctor picked up Luke's tablet and pulled up a video of Mimir's introduction. "They give it away, really. At least, if my hunch is right."

"They tend to be." Sarah Jane finally entered the kitchen and made herself a cup of tea.

"Then these people are somehow manipulating timelines around them. They're zeroing in on one potential, no matter how likely it was that that would actually happen. The real question here is: where did they get the technology to do this? Or who is helping them? It's going to be a couple of centuries before the human race arrives anywhere near this kind of ability." The Doctor paused, happily taking the cup of tea Sarah Jane offered. "There are several races that have the ability: Vainkrons, Tiqai, Cadels, and Bulvins."

"Time's pretty flexible, right?" Luke took a cup of tea from his mother. Sarah Jane sat down at the table. "I mean, I know there's fixed points but otherwise, time just adjusts to the change."

"To an extent, but there's a limit to how much time can be manipulated." The Doctor looked over. "What if one of the people whose timelines the Mimir manipulated is now off the path they needed to be on to ensure a fixed point in time actually happened? Time has a way of adjusting back to where it needs to be, yes, but that course correction is relatively limited. These effects could be catastrophic."

Before Sarah Jane could respond, she heard a series of beeps from the attic. Getting up, she charged up the stairs. Luke, Clyde and the Doctor followed close behind. As she entered the attic, Mr. Smith was already out and data was rolling quickly across his screen.

"Sarah Jane, there was an energy signature similar to the ones the Doctor and Luke have had me track."

"Where?" The Doctor asked before she could.

"Central London. There's localized reports that a Sontaran is wandering the streets."

"Find it and track it. Luke, stay here and monitor the situation. If Clyde and Rani come, you three are to stay here. Under no circumstances are you to follow us to London."

"Luke, if you want to bring the calculations up here, you can run more and see if you can see a pattern." The Doctor smiled at the boy.

"I can do that." Luke beamed, rushing downstairs.

"Well, Doctor. A Sontaran loose in London. Shall we go take a look?"

"It would be my pleasure."

Sarah Jane knew when they were close when she heard the screams. It seemed like adventures with the Doctor involved a lot of running and screaming.

There seemed to be something wrong with his staser as he was shooting taxis but they weren't, for lack of better term, blowing up. A couple were stranded in the streets with flat tires, still others were upside down or on their side. It seemed that the more the Sontaran shot, the more frustrated it got and the less its staser did.

Trees were down, limbs all over. There were charred marks across the grass, the benches were destroyed, the small playground was melted in spots.

And of course, people were running everywhere.

Though luckily it seemed like people were safe and there were no bodies littering the ground.

With this Sontaran was a woman who looked vaguely familiar. Sarah

Jane couldn't quite place her.

The small park would need time before it was back to its former glory.

"Halt! This planet is now under the control of the Sontaran Empire and as such I order you to relinquish your transportation method."

When the cab quickly got out of the area, the Sontaran looked frustrated. He spotted Sarah Jane and the Doctor. "You! You are the Doctor. You trapped me here to help the Rutans."

The Doctor stepped up. "I assure you I have no interest in your war with the Rutans. What I do have interest in is why you've come to Earth."

Pointing his staser at the girl, he announced, "I appeared next to this human."

The girl in question was crying and it was then that Sarah Jane recognized her. "I'm not sure this is what you had in mind when you said you preferred your men shorter."

The woman shook her head.

"Let the girl go." The Doctor took a step towards the Sontaran only to have the staser pointed at him. "I noticed that's not working the way it's supposed to."

"More trickery from you."

"I am not behind this."

Sarah Jane looked between the woman, the Sontaran, and the Doctor. She didn't know how they'd get to Rachel and she really didn't want to figure out just how disabled that staser was.

Luke wondered how he got into these messes. His mother had been quite clear, he was to stay on Bannerman Road.

Yet somehow he found himself taking the underground to the middle of London because Clyde and Rani didn't want to miss out on an adventure with the Doctor. They weren't the ones who were going to be grounded until they finished A Levels. He'd never been grounded. Clyde had after the second-to-last fight he got in—somehow he'd gotten past his mother last night and she didn't know about yesterday.

"Mum said to stay in the attic." He tried to convince them to head back. This was different than normal—mum seemed more tense than usual.

"It will be fine! We've faced a Sontaran before and came out okay." Clyde looked up from his sketch pad.

"We're two stops away, according to Mr. Smith." Rani was almost bouncing with excitement.

Luke squirmed, fiddling with the foil Clyde had insisted on bringing with them. They'd told the operator they were going to an afternoon class—Luke had quickly learned that excuses didn't have to be overly elaborate. "What good are we going to be? Mum and the Doctor have dealt with stuff like this before. Won't we just get in the way?"

"Mate. You've helped save this world so many times and yet you let those bozos from school in your head?" Clyde gave him a look.

Luke shrugged as they announced their stop. They gathered their stuff and stood as the doors opened. They made their way above ground with the crowd and followed the sound of screaming. They smelled it before they saw it—charred wood makes a rather distinctive smell.

"Woah," Rani whispered as they turned a corner.

Luke followed and saw the devastation in the park. "Guys! Duck!"

He quickly ducked behind some charred play equipment. Clyde and Rani quickly followed. About 20 yards ahead a standoff was happening. The Sontaran had his staser pointed at a woman and the Doctor and his mum stood a couple yards away.

"Isn't that the girl from the show yesterday?"

"The chick who was supposed to meet a tall, dark stranger?"

"A short one…"

Luke hushed them both. Neither looked that abashed. "Guys, we really shouldn't be here."

He peeked around the corner and caught his mum's eye. The look he got back made him sure they would be discussing this at length.

"Mum's spotted us."

"She can't do anything now. Alright, Mr. Encyclopedia, what do we know about Sontarans?"

"They're a warrior species. They've fought a never-ending war against a race called the Rutans."

"Any weak points?" Rani asked.

"I remember this one. It's their backs."

"That vent on the back of their necks." Luke nodded to the Sontaran who appeared to be arguing with the Doctor. "According to Mr. Smith their weakness is on their backs because Sontarans never turn their back on their enemy."

"So we sneak up, hit him on the vent, knock him out and call it a day?"

"You approach him and that woman might get hurt." Rani hissed.

A shout got their attention and all three peeked around the equipment to see the woman get shoved to the side and the Sontaran fire his staser. His mum barely missed getting hit.

When she got up, Luke noticed that a bit of her jacket was on fire. She noticed too and threw it off, stamping on it with her foot.

The Doctor used the distraction to charge the Sontaran, knocking his staser out of his hand. It clattered to the ground several feet away. The two fought, the Doctor losing the advantage even though he showed a mastery of marital arts.

"We've got to do something." Rani shifted nervously.

Forget being grounded until after A levels. His mother might just ground him until after University for this.

Staying light on his feet, Luke charged towards the fighting pair, foil poised. Both were so focused on the fight that they didn't notice him until it was too late.

Luke thrust the foil and hit the Sontaran right on the vent. He went down with a rather satisfying thunk.

"You did it, Luke!" Rani exclaimed.

"See, if you can take an alien like that down, what's a couple of bullies?" Clyde patted him on the back.

He noticed a shadow behind him and turned to find a rather furious mother. "What. Were. You. Three. Thinking."

The three kids in the backseat were quickly learning just how Sarah Jane had earned the reputation of Ice Queen.

"Now, Sarah."

"Don't. You. Start." Sarah Jane glared at the Doctor through the rear view mirror.

All three kids shifted. "I cannot believe you three went into Central London by yourselves and put yourselves

into a very dangerous situation. After we faced them last year, I would have thought you'd stay far away."

"Luke, your swordplay was quite excellent." The Doctor beamed, ignoring the glare Sarah Jane sent his way. "You should be proud. Your son is an excellent student."

"An excellent student who should know better. I told you to stay at home. And Rani, Clyde where do your parents think you are?"

"With you. They stopped asking ages ago once I mention your name." Rani shrugged.

"Mum's at work. And…" Clyde sighed. "It was my idea."

Sarah Jane let her expression soften slightly. "Thank you for being honest. But what you three did today was dangerous, stupid, and could have been deadly. When I tell you to stay put, I mean it."

She turned off the highway, knuckles white on the wheel. When she'd seen them, her heart stopped. "Did you think to realize that your presence in the park could have hindered the Doctor and I? That we would shift our focus from the task at hand to keep the three of you safe?"

The three in the backseat wouldn't look her in the eye.

"Doctor!" Luke stood at the top of the stairs, excited despite being thoroughly grounded. "Doctor, I found something."

The Doctor took off up the stairs and by the time Sarah Jane made it to the attic the two were already at Mr. Smith's console. "So your hypothesis was that Mimir was somehow manipulating timelines starting with winning the lottery a couple of years ago?"

"Correct."

"We took that hypothesis and discovered that there was unusual energy around their hometown on the day they won the lottery. From there you had Mr. Smith and I tracing it to see if it followed them."

"And?" The Doctor leaned in.

"It has. But there's been bad as well as good. Their friends and family have gotten sick, fire, injuries, some in their direct noticeable circle and some not quite close." Luke pushed a couple of keys and the data came up.

"Fascinating. Your boy has done it, Sarah."

"That he has." Sarah Jane put her hand on his shoulder.

"This is really something, Luke. You helped Mr. Smith zero in on the relevant data, thus expediting his search astronomically."

"He did," Mr. Smith agreed.

"Well done." The Doctor smiled. "Now you can help me figure out what's causing this."

Sarah Jane was well aware that the Doctor could do that on his own and probably would prefer to, but she appreciated him including Luke and letting him help. The Doctor had been going out of his way to include Luke, as if he knew what Luke had been going through the last few months.

Or maybe, he was doing it as a favor to an old friend, a favor she very much treasured.

"Sarah Jane." Mr. Smith roused her from her musing.

"Yes?"

"I managed to get you an interview with Mimir in an hour. Luke and I thought you'd want to talk to them."

"Excellent, go see if you can find the source. Hold on." The Doctor

ducked into the TARDIS and came out with a small device that could easily fit into her pocket. "Take this. I'll be able to use Mr. Smith to track the readings from here."

Up close, the four seemed different from the confident group on stage. They seemed like four kids who should be in college and not touring the world. Galatina was relaxed, eating from the table that lined one wall of their green room. Leo, Orion, and Lynx were all crowded onto a couch.

"Thank you for agreeing to speak with me." Sarah Jane smiled at the group.

"Was coming to the show yesterday research for your article?" Orion asked, leaning forward.

"What is it on anyways?" Leo crossed his arms.

"Doing a study on the entrepreneurial spirit of millennials. You've come a long way the last couple of years and captured international interest. That and some of the software and app developers in various countries, I'm thinking of doing a series of them."

"And we'd make a wonderful opening act." Galatina smirked. "Last I checked, we're headliners these days."

"Is it true you four got the funding to start your act by winning the lottery?"

Leo threw his arm around Lynx's shoulder. "Lynx gave the number but still split it with us."

She turned to Lynx who looked rather uncomfortable. His body language was rigid and he alternated between staring at her, when he thought she wouldn't notice, and not meeting her eyes.

"It was a guess," he mumbled, his first words since she walked in.

"Some people say you're psychic, others say you're taking advantage of the new digital age and are screening your audience members."

"Surely you don't expect us to reveal our secrets, Miss Smith?" Galatina leaned back in her chair.

"Of course not." Sarah Jane smiled. "What would you say to the bad luck that's followed you lately?"

That got everyone to squirm. Finally Leo spoke up. "I mean, everyone has periods where they get bad luck. We burned through a bit with that lottery ticket."

"And what do your friends and family think of your success?"

"My family loves it. They knew I was meant to be a star." Galatina smiled, getting up to grab something from the table. "It doesn't hurt that I've paid for a couple of family vacations and paid off their mortgage."

"It's just my dad and me." Orion smiled. "He travelled with us on the US tour. He helps manage our finances. Gave him a job, he hadn't had one for a bit before all this."

"My little sister took me in for show and tell a few months ago." Leo smiled. "I was a crowd favorite."

"And Lynx?"

"These guys are my family. We seem pretty happy." He squirmed. "My birth family, I'm not sure if they're out there somewhere or not. And my adoptive family is supportive…they wish I'd gone to college…and I may, when this settles down."

Before Sarah Jane could answer, her phone rang. A quick glance at the caller ID showed that it was Luke.

"I'm terribly sorry, it's my son. I'll only be a moment."

Stepping out into the hall quickly, she took the call. "What is it Luke?"

"Actually, it's me." The Doctor spoke up. "It's the Tiqai."

"What?"

"The energy. I ruled them out early this morning because I didn't think any would be in this corner of the galaxy. Someone near Mimir is a Tiqai."

"That's one of the races you mentioned earlier. One who would have the ability to do this, right?"

"Fascinating race. They're temporally sensitive. They can pick timelines out and can navigate a person to a specific one. They are highly monitored on Gallifrey because of their potential to catastrophically alter the Web of Time. This one must have slipped their notice."

Sarah Jane bit back the uncomfortable feeling at hiding his future from him. "Maybe they're not so perfect after all."

That earned her a dry chuckle. "I never said they were. Luke and I are about ten minutes out. Alistair is sorting out the mess with our Sontaran friend."

"Better him than me."

There was a pause. "We actually went to a planet in their star system, the Tiqai. Velnillion."

"Oh! As that the lovely planet with the flower goddess and festival?"

"Quite right."

Sarah Jane smiled fondly at the memory of one of their danger-free missions. That festival had been fun and spending time enjoying an alien culture was an experience she treasured to this day. "I'll see what I can dig up."

"They're humanoid. The eyes could give them away but color contacts would hide that fairly well. Their eyes are shades of goldenrod," the Doctor continued. "Some say it's because time manifests as golden, and others say it has to do with the skies of Gallifrey, but if I'm honest I suspect some Time Lords have put a bit too much stock into the idea that the universe revolves around them."

"Let me do some digging."

"We're in the lobby on our way up."

Sarah Jane bit back what she wanted to say knowing it wouldn't do much good to attempt to lecture the Doctor on responsibility.

The group stopped in the elevator but Luke paused when he saw Lynx in the theater, sitting on the edge, legs dangling.

"I'll be up in a second."

He made his way into the theater and down the aisle. "Why aren't you upstairs with my mum?"

"You're her son?" Lynx looked up. "Tell me, are the stories true?"

Luke paused as he climbed the stairs to the stage. It wasn't noticeable unless you were looking for it, but he could just make out the rim of contacts. "You're a Tiqai, aren't you?"

"What makes you think that?"

"The contacts…they're colored aren't they?" He sat down beside Lynx.

Lynx nodded. "I came here when I was little. My planet is probably gone. There was a war and we got caught up in it because of our ability to manipulate timelines. We weren't even a part of it, just drawn in because two races fought a never ending fight."

"It ended." Luke looked at him. "So, you look at the timelines of the audience and feed the information to your friends."

"I take the most likely timeline and tell it to them." Lynx shrugged. "But then sometimes, they don't turn out how I saw…they take a darker turn. I saw the news, you know, I know about aliens in London. It's all my fault."

"Why do it?"

Lynx turned to him. "You wouldn't understand. I'm different. I don't really remember my home world but I'm not from here. But I made a life for myself, I made friends, I have a family that maybe I'm not as close to as I should be. But I found a way to use what makes me different to make those I care about happy. But now it's gone wrong."

"I understand better than you think."

"How so?"

Luke smiled. "I was made, not born. I was supposed to be a tool for aliens to take over the world."

"For real?"

He raised up his shirt to show he had no belly button. "I'm far smarter than anyone my age, probably more than most adults, yet I understand next to nothing about pop culture which makes me stand out in school."

Luke looked away. "I get bullied a lot. Because I'm different, because I'm adopted, because I have no dad, because I don't understand the latest fad or craze and would rather spend the weekend curled up in the attic ready a physics textbook and correct the errors in it."

"I don't know what to do. I think I've messed up. It's not wrong, is it? To use what I've learned to help?"

"Timelines are complicated. My mum travelled with a time traveler for a bit."

"I know." Lynx smiled. "It's where my Earth name came from. The first alien she ever faced."

"What?" Luke laughed.

"There was a man who came from a nearby planet. It's one of the few memories I have of my home." Lynx stared off into the auditorium, his eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "Mom had to work and dad was off fighting and I was sick. He agreed to watch me and told me stories. When he was my age, a woman named Sarah Jane Smith and a man called the Doctor had come for their annual flower festival. He'd been sick and she'd watched him while the Doctor helped with a fairly small problem. Peace talks or something. She'd told him stories of their adventures and he told them to me."

He chuckled. "Imagine my surprise when I looked at the audience and I saw her there. The woman from stories, the woman who's part of the only memories I have of my home."

Luke smiled. "She's wonderful, she's brave—she's my mum. She adopted me even though I knew she wasn't exactly comfortable with the idea at the time. She saves the world but still makes sure that I try and be at least a little normal."

He turned to Lynx. "Do your friends know?"

Lynx nodded. "They caught me without my contacts in. I explained. They were weirded out but then thought it was cool. Our little secret."

"And do they know about the things going wrong?"

"No. I kept it from them. They'd want to stop and this makes them so

happy. I just wish there was a way to use my gift in a way that doesn't hurt others."

"There is."

Luke and Lynx looked up to see the Doctor lingering just off the stage. He was smiling as he came over to join them sitting on the far side of Lynx. "If you'd let me, I'd like to help you manage your gift so that you stay on time's good side."

Lynx nodded.

"And there. I think the old girl is back to normal." Patting the TARDIS, he straightened up and turned to her. "Sarah, it's been an absolute pleasure."

"Back to younger me?"

"Indeed. Don't worry, I won't tell you anything about your future. I think that's a story best experienced."

"It wasn't all good." She looked away, off to the side.

"Ah, but you know better than anyone that it's the experiences that help make us who we are. And the good, the bad, the scary, the amazing, that made you Sarah Jane Smith. I know I wouldn't be where I am without you, and from this operation you have here, neither would the world."

A knock at the door brought them out of their moment and Sarah Jane went over to answer. To her delight, it was Alistair who strolled in, no longer surprised by the transdimensional space within. "Well thank you Doctor, Miss Smith, for helping me solve this. The Sontaran who was transported here will be beamed off planet by the Shadow Proclamation tomorrow. It was decided that he shouldn't remain on Earth…I remember coming in when you were exiled. Seeing it remain the same is…a welcome reminder."

"It hasn't changed. I'm sure when I get back, you'll be there going on about something or another." The Doctor approached Alistair. "It's been a pleasure, Brigadier."

"Always a pleasure, Doctor." Alistair smiled, shaking his old friend's hand.

"And you, Miss Smith." The Doctor smiled. "You have a wonderful boy who has some wonderful friends who I wish I'd gotten to know more. But alas…one never knows where I might show up and if I'm honest, I'd rather not run into myself again."

Sarah Jane laughed, giving the Doctor, her first Doctor, a hug. "It was good to see you again."

The Doctor wiped a tear off her cheek.

She shook her head, breath catching as she turned away. "Thank you, for everything, Doctor."

"It was my pleasure."

Sarah Jane and Alistair made their way out of the TARDIS and the familiar dematerialization sequence sounded and soon the attic felt just a bit emptier. The kids were sprawled out in the attic finishing homework that they really shouldn't have left until Sunday evening.

It was business as usual on Bannerman Road. And as she did more with each passing day, Sarah Jane appreciated it all.

The Circles of Drel

Harry King

Still No Sign of Missing Girl
By Rani Chandra

Could reports of mysterious lights in the sky be to blame?

After going missing a week ago in the Northpass Green area of Wiltshire, police still have no leads in the case of Anna Clarke. The teenager vanished after spending the day with her friends, later deciding to walk home alone. According to her family, none of her belongings were missing and she showed no sign of wanting to run away, leading many to believe that she has been taken. However, if this is the case, who took her—or *what*?

Every year, numerous crop circles appear in Wiltshire fields. They range in shape and size, and many are later claimed by individuals as their own creations. There are a few, though, that continue to remain a mystery. In the area that the girl went missing, multiple unclaimed crop circles are currently visible, and both these and sightings of strange lights in the sky have led to alleged reports of extraterrestrial abductions. Could this be the reason why Anna Clarke vanished without a trace? Some locals seem to think so and, if the police don't find anything soon, rumours will surely only grow…

"It's a fake."

Having paid £10 to see what was apparently the latest crop circle to have appeared in Wiltshire, Sarah Jane was unimpressed. The circle itself was a simple one—a solid circle with two rings around the outside of it—and, after taking a closer look, she had quickly concluded that it showed no abnormal signs that would suggest anything other than creation by a farmer with a plank of wood and some rope.

"Huh? How can you tell?" Rani, Sarah Jane's companion for the day, replied. She was the reason that they were there. In her quest to become a journalist, Rani had been scouring the news for interesting stories. One, with

its flashy title about alien abductions, had caught her attention.

She had been practising for her future job by researching and rewriting news stories that she found interesting, but, even after finishing her own version of the article, she felt like something was missing. More research was needed, Rani had decided—especially because with everything that she knew about aliens, she couldn't dismiss the rumours about their involvement entirely. Besides, what were the chances of another human taking the teenage girl? It seemed to her that residents there had a tight-knit community—people trusted their neighbours; friends and families were there for each other. Surely *somebody* would know if one of the neighbours was behind the disappearance?

But…perhaps that was why the locals had convinced themselves of alien intervention? For some people, it was easier to imagine a distant, otherworldly force taking a child than one of their own—especially considering the crop circles that were regularly appearing. Whatever the apparent clues, the newspaper stories about lights in the sky and abductions had drawn in Rani—but they had not convinced Sarah Jane. Anna's disappearance was because of something more down to Earth—she was sure of it.

"Look at it! The pattern is simple enough that a child could make it, and I doubt that there are any soil abnormalities. Take a look at the stems too. There's no sign of stem damage that could have been caused by anything other than a board pressing them down is that messy pattern."

"Oh yeah, I was reading about that last night. Stem elongation and heat damage, right? It's one of the big pieces of evidence that people like to cite?"

"It's nothing that can't be recreated with microwaves, Rani. All of this is nonsense. It's a fake, probably created by the farmer that owns the field as a way of bringing in some extra money."

The farmer in question was Patrick Finch—a lanky man with wispy, blond hair and tanned skin from his days working in the outdoors. According to the information that Mr Smith had helped Rani dig up before their trip to Wiltshire, he'd been working the same land for near enough twenty years now with no previous history of trouble or 'alien' encounters. That had changed this year, though. Suddenly, crop circles had been popping up all over his land. Of course, he hadn't been the only farmer to report such things appearing, but he had been the one most greatly affected by them.

Not wanting to leave anybody alone with the latest crop circle, the farmer had also stuck nearby to Sarah Jane and Rani—close enough that he didn't seem impolite, but not so that he was out of earshot.

"What d'you mean?" Finch responded, a defensive tone making its way into his voice as he made his way over to the pair in order to confront them about what they had been saying. "It's not a fake."

Sarah Jane could only sigh in exasperation and roll her eyes at the farmer's denial of what (to her, at least) was so obvious. She bent down and tugged at the flattened crop below their feet—pulling up one of the squashed wheat stems. "Mr Finch, not even the most dedicated believers would think that this crop circle is real.

I mean, look at this! It looks like an elephant ran through your field!"

The stem she was holding was bent and broken in multiple places. Whoever had flattened the plants had obviously done it in an incredibly clumsy fashion. Probably a beginner, Sarah Jane figured. The people who were experienced in creating crop circles tended to make it less obvious that somebody had been trampling the plants down.

"Ms. Smith, I assure you, I have no idea how—"

"No. No, let me tell you what *I* have no idea about, Mr Finch," Sarah Jane interrupted the farmer, any previous act of patience instantly dropping. "I have no idea how you can so *obviously* use the disappearance of a young girl as a *quick cash grab*. Anna Clarke has been missing for a week now, and these 'crop circles' are just taking attention away from the fact that she may have been taken by a very real, very dangerous person—not some made up extra-terrestrial in his flying saucer!"

Seemingly unable to defend himself, the farmer could do nothing but glare in response to Sarah Jane's outburst. An awkward silence descended upon the trio. It was Rani who, after a moment, decided to break it.

"Maybe we should go," she said. If Sarah Jane was correct and the farmer had faked the crop circle, then they were unlikely to find anything else here. If she was wrong, then antagonising Finch was not going to do anything useful. Better to leave and look elsewhere for information that could help find the girl, right?

Sarah Jane seemed to agree. She nodded and, after glancing at the pattern made in the field before her once more, turned to leave—nothing more to say to the farmer. Rani, meanwhile, hesitated—wondering if she was supposed to say anything—then jogged after her friend and mentor, leaving a wordless, fuming Finch behind her.

"Do you think there's something more to it?"

Sarah Jane and Rani had made their way to a small café in the town centre. With a coffee each sitting in front of them, they were discussing the disappearance that they were investigating.

"Possibly," Sarah Jane admitted. "But possibly not. The crop circles are fake—they always are—but the reports of glowing objects in the sky… Anna Clarke is certainly gone, and I've seen stranger than mysterious lights having something to do with that."

"Perhaps Clyde will have found something out."

Despite wanting to come on this latest adventure, Clyde had been forced to remain behind. Too much homework to do, apparently. He'd promised to do some research in his spare time, though, and Sarah Jane had allowed him to use Mr Smith for it (and for his homework if he needed it, providing that he did not cheat).

In that moment, Rani's phone began to ring. "Speak of the devil!" She laughed as she answered it. "Hiya, Clyde. How's it going?"

Back in London, homework had been abandoned in favour of using Mr Smith to look for more information about the missing girl. Sure, it was good to be sensible and get school work done (especially when it was due in on Monday), but did it hold a candle

to actually chasing down *aliens*? Of course not.

"You won't believe what I found."

Rani grinned. The expression caught Sarah Jane's attention. "What's happened? Put him on speaker," she instructed. There was a moment of silence as Rani fiddled with the settings on her phone, then:

"Right, so get this. I looked up Anna Clarke's social media—Facebook and all that—and guess what."

"I don't suppose she's visited a certain farm lately?" Sarah Jane asked. That would be just brilliant. If they could link the missing girl with the frustrating farmer from before, then that could be evidence that aliens did not in fact have anything to do with her disappearance. Perhaps then people could stop talking about 'abductions' and instead focus on actually *finding* her.

As it was, though, Clyde had found something else. *"Not that I can see, but she does seem to be part of a few groups dedicated to crop circles. That's got to be something, right?"*

"That's *brilliant*, Clyde!"

"Thanks, Rani! So, me and Mr Smith had a look in them and she didn't post anything, but she was definitely looking at them. You think she could have been out there looking at them? Maybe that's when the UFOs got her?"

"She wasn't abducted by extra-terrestrials, Clyde. Those crop circles are *manmade*," Sarah Jane interjected. Perhaps she had made them herself? Or, maybe…

"So we know that these circles aren't anything supernatural, and we know that Patrick Finch has been affected by them the most in this local area. Surely it makes sense that he is the one creating them?" she suggested. "Clyde, can you check to see if he has a history of crop circles appearing on his land?"

"Sure. You hear that, Mr Smith?"

"Of course."

The sound of the whirring of machines could be heard for a moment as Mr Smith carried out his search. One of the most powerful computers on the planet (if not *the* most powerful), the chances of him missing anything—assuming there was something out there to find—were low. Finally, he seemed to uncover something:

"In the last seven years, there has been at least one account a year of a crop circle on the land of Patrick Finch—so much so that he only owns a single field that has never experienced such a thing. This is unusual in comparison to other large farms, where farmers rarely report the appearance of the phenomena on such a frequent basis."

"And why would that be if he wasn't the one behind them?"

"Because he's annoyed the aliens somehow?" Clyde suggested, not quite having let go of that idea just yet.

"Sarah Jane already said that it wasn't aliens, Clyde," Rani pointed out. Were the other with them at the café, she was sure she would have seen him shrug in reply.

"All I'm saying is, how can you be certain? We've seen some weird stuff before—who's to say that this isn't more of that?" But he wasn't going to push it. Sarah Jane knew what she was talking about, right? If she thought that a human had done this, then Clyde supposed that she was likely correct. *"Okay, what do we do next then? If*

you think the farmer is making the circles, how do we prove it?"

For a moment, Sarah Jane thought about that. They couldn't just confront the man about it—he would just deny everything. "I suppose we have to catch him in the act," she eventually decided. "Clyde, if you have time—*after* you've finished your homework—can you and Mr Smith look into the missing girl some more? Rani, I think you're going to need to call your parents and ask if you can stay overnight."

Tucked under a tree atop a hill, Sarah Jane and Rani both looked out into the darkness. They had settled themselves in a spot that had the perfect view of the last remaining field belonging to Finch that had yet to see a crop circle. The theory was that if they were lucky, they could catch him in the act. No, they had no basis for their hope that the farmer would pick this night and this field to make a new crop circle—if it even *was* him making them—but they had their fingers crossed. And if nothing happened? Well, Sarah Jane supposed she could get Mr Smith to keep half an eye on the situation for a while, just in case some evidence did turn up eventually.

Despite the blankets that they had found in the back of Sarah Jane's car, Rani couldn't help but shiver. "Should have brought a jumper," she muttered to herself as she rubbed her arms. Even though it was the middle of summer, the exposed field that they were sitting in was cold.

"If nothing happens soon, we'll go back to the hotel," Sarah Jane promised in return. She lowered her binoculars—which weren't really helping anyway due to the darkness—so that she could look at her companion for a moment. "If you're too cold, you can go back to the car."

"No, it's fine. I'm just—" Rani shivered again. "Just a bit chilly, that's all. Don't worry."

Before anybody could say anything else, two lights suddenly shone out through the dark in the field below them. They were small but moving rapidly—a car, perhaps? Sarah Jane brought her binoculars up to her eyes again.

"Can you see who it is?" whispered Rani. Her quiet tone was not needed—they were far enough away that they could not be heard—but she continued with it anyway. "Is it him?" She was, of course, referring to Patrick Finch. Or had somebody else arrived in his field? They were human at least—last time Rani checked, aliens didn't tend to drive cars.

There was a moment of silence, then: "No… No, they're in a truck but I can't see the driver." They'd just have to wait and hope that the car would stop and that, when the driver got out, they could be seen in the headlights.

It wasn't long before they got what they wanted. What they could now see was a pickup truck came to a halt near the centre of the field, and the two could see now that it had been driving up tractor tracks that had previously left in the crop. By doing that, they were preventing the long stems of corn from being disturbed any more than they already had been. After a pause, the driver got out, turned a torch on, and walked to the back of the truck. It was hard to see, but—through her binoculars, Sarah Jane thought she could

see the figure pulling things out of the back of the truck.

A moment later and the figure made its way around to the front of the vehicle. As he stepped into the light, it immediately became clear that it *was* Finch. "It's him." Sarah Jane whispered, getting to her feet now that there was something to watch. Now, what was he holding? It looked like…

"Planks of wood!" She exclaimed. There! That was it! Proof that he had been making the crop circles!

Rani seemed to realise this too and also jumped to her feet. "So we know he made them? Should we—should we be filming this or something?" They hadn't brought a camera with them, but she at least had her phone. The footage wouldn't be very good from the position they were in—Finch was too far away, and the light was too low—but at least it would be something, right?

"Wait until later," Sarah Jane instructed. "If he's doing what we think he is, then it's going to take time."

She was right. Whether it was for what felt like hours or it *was* for hours, Rani and Sarah Jane stood, shivering occasionally as they watched the figure of the farmer slowly flatten his crop with wooden boards. It was a tedious process—one that the two women watching quickly grew bored of—but they knew they couldn't leave. Not yet, anyway.

As the night went on, and Finch finally seemed to be nearing the competition of his project, Rani started filming the man. As she had predicted, the video really did look terrible. The farmer and the circle were barely visible, but you could see them—even if it was only barely.

"It's like art," Rani commented as she filmed. Maybe not this example of a crop circle so much—as it was being formed, it had become obvious that it was yet another simple one—but she'd seem some of the more complex ones on the internet and surely they counted as such a thing? So much time and effort must have gone into them.

Sarah Jane made a non-committal noise in response. "The ones that admit that they're manmade, perhaps. The hoaxes, though—"

She didn't finish that sentence. As she was speaking, another light had appeared before them—this time in the sky. The bright light dashed and danced about, moving at an unnatural speed and changing direction in the blink of an eye. Sarah Jane could just about make out the ship. It was like something from a movie—a large, rounded disk shape that any child could identify as a UFO—but it was not one she recognised as belonging to any alien race that she knew of.

In the field, Finch seemed to have noticed the craft. He watched with a confused expression as it darted closed until, finally, it was directly above him. When a beam of light suddenly shone out from the bottom of the ship, the farmer began to run. He rushed to his pickup truck, practically leaping into it in his hurry to get to safety. As the truck started and began to rapidly reverse, paying no mind to where he was driving in his hurry to escape, the UFO's beam of light danced over the crop circle. It seemed interested in it, though Sarah Jane wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was studying it? She couldn't tell.

Without warning, the ship began to move again. It chased after the speed-

ing truck, its light running along the ground, until it was once again above Finch and then…everything stopped.

"I thought that only happened in films," Rani whispered, stunned as she watched the truck—with the farmer within it—slowly start to rise from the ground. Surprisingly, there were no calls for help. It was as if everything within the light was frozen—stuck in the moment of terror in which the light had picked up the ma.

Sarah Jane, however, was not in a similar situation. She ran toward the field, trying to get there and help, but it was too late. In a flash of light (one so bright that Rani had to shield her eyes), the ship was gone—and the pickup truck with it.

The world seemed silent as Sarah Jane stopped. She had no idea what had just happened but, after everything, it seemed that it *was* aliens behind this after all. How could that be? She had been so sure that it hadn't been possible…as she ran a frustrated hand through her hair and looked around the field, Rani caught up with her.

"I think I filmed it all, Sarah Jane. It's not super clear, but I got it. What—what happened?"

"I don't know, Rani, but I think we should take a closer look at that crop circle."

Together, and still a little dazed from what had just happened, the two made their way into the field. Even to Sarah Jane's trained eye, it looked normal. The crop circle itself was shoddily made (just like the one they had seen earlier that day) but no scorch marks, no weird phenomena—just an abandoned torch lying next to some planks of wood, and some car tracks through the wheat. If there hadn't been a truck, and somebody had picked up everything that had been left behind, then nobody would have known that anything had happened at all.

Oh.

Suddenly, an idea came to Sarah Jane. What if the missing girl, Anna, had suffered a similar fate? The newspapers were saying that she vanished while walking home from a friend's house, so it seemed entirely possible, right?

Oh!

And maybe Mr Smith could recognise the UFO from Rani's footage? The pieces of the puzzle seemed to be falling together now and maybe—just maybe—she could get Anna back safe and sound.

"Rani, can you send the video to Clyde and ask him to get Mr Smith to analyse it? Hopefully, that will get us some answers."

"This footage is of a Drel spaceship," Mr Smith said, his voice reverberating over the phone and across the hotel room that Sarah Jane and Rani were sat in. It was the morning after they had seen Patrick Finch abducted and neither had slept particularly well—worries about what they had seen filling their minds.

Both sat on a bed next to Sarah Jane's phone, they were once more roping Clyde and Mr Smith into helping them out. Clyde had grumbled about being dragged out of bed so early on a weekend, but he didn't mind really—not once he saw the video Rani had sent him.

"So these Drel, what's their deal? Are they behind all those abductions and crop circles that you hear about

or something?" Clyde could be heard asking. He sounded excited—probably due to a combination of aliens being part of this whole situation after all, but also those aliens being so stereotypical. To him, it was cool! It was like he was in some kind of cheesy movie!

"No, Clyde, the farmer made the crop circle. The spaceship just showed up afterwards," Rani pointed out.

At the other's words, Sarah Jane nodded. "It only arrived after Finch was done, as if it was interested in the circle itself and not the farmer. Mr Smith, are there any records of the Drel? I don't know, do they use a circular script, perhaps?"

"The Drel have a peaceful culture, though it includes a fondness for flying at high speeds over what they deem to be underdeveloped worlds. It is believed that they do this for no other reason than fun."

"They're joyriders." That realisation was said with a hint of relief. If they weren't malicious, then anybody that they had taken—such as Finch, and most like Anna—was likely to be safe, right? Though, Sarah Jane decided as an afterthought, they were likely rather shaken by the experience. After all, not everybody dealt with aliens on a regular basis. "But how do the crop circles fit in?"

"When the Drel find a place that they enjoy racing in, they leave a symbol in a visible area to warn other Drel away. They began to do this after multiple in-flight crashes occurred due to ships sharing airspace while travelling at high speeds. The symbols they leave often look like typical crop circle examples. It is possible that the Drel ship became confused."

Slowly, Sarah Jane was starting to get a clearer picture of what was happening. "And, seeing Finch on the ground by what they thought was another ship's calling card, they got confused and decided to investigate the person that made it?"

"The probability of such a thing seems high."

"But then, what about Anna?" Rani spoke up. "She was just walking home, right? If they took her, why would they do that?"

"Actually, I think she might have been doing something else." Clyde had taken over the phone now. *"Me and Mr Smith were looking more into her social media, and we found some stuff. So, you remember that she was looking at crop circles online? We were doing some digging, and we found a forum account that we think belongs to her, and get this; she was posting photos. Wait a second. Mr Smith, can you send those photos to Rani's phone, please?"*

Instantly, a beep could be heard from Rani's pocket. She pulled out her mobile and, sure enough, had received multiple photos, all of different crop circles. As she began to flick through then, she noticed that she recognised some of them. Where from, though? It took a second before—

Oh!

"These are all local to here, Sarah Jane! I remember them from when I was researching what was happening!" Excited by this discovery, she handed the phone over to the other. Sarah Jane glanced through the photos herself and nodded. Rani was right about where they were from, and if these were posted by the missing girl…

"Do you have the dates these were

posted on, Clyde? Anna's parents reported her missing last Tuesday." The chances seemed small, but if any of the photographs were posted on the day she disappeared, perhaps they could prove where she was?

"Sure, Mr Smith should know."

"This image was posted before dawn on the Tuesday." Rani's phone beeped again. It was an image of a crop circle illuminated by torchlight. The photo was hardly the clearest one ever, but it got the point across. *"The account had not made any posts since then."*

Rani frowned at the photo. "What's that? In the background. It looked like a star but…that's a bit bright, isn't it?"

Once again, she was correct. When Sarah Jane looked at the photo again, she too saw what her friend was talking about. There was a dot of light brighter than all of the others. Perhaps it was a satellite passing overhead but even then the luminosity of it seemed out of place. "I think that's the Drel ship," Sarah Jane stated. "Which makes it even more likely that she was abducted by them."

It was an exciting moment. Finally they had something to suggest what had happened to the missing girl! No, it was not what Sarah Jane expected when she had first agreed to take Rani on the trip, but she was glad all the same. If it meant getting a child back to their parents, she'd happily be wrong about what was and wasn't aliens every single time.

The question now was what to do next.

To Sarah Jane, it seemed like the best course of action was to attempt to lure the Drel in and then attempt to communicate with them. In theory, it sounded like they didn't want to hurt anybody. Mr Smith had made it sound like their aim was just to have some fun and then fly off again, so perhaps they were just as scared as Anna and Finch were, as well as anybody else that they had picked up in their confusion.

"We'll build our own crop circle," she decided, words firm as the decision was made. That seemed to have attracted the UFO for the previous abductees, so it should work to get their attention one more time. "We'll draw them in, then try to talk to them. Mr Smith, do you think you could establish communications with the ship?"

"That should be within my capabilities."

"Good. Clyde, we'll call you once it's dark tomorrow. Feel free to help yourself to anything in the kitchen, okay?"

"Nice! Thanks, Sarah Jane!"

"In the meantime, Rani and I are going to try and find a hardware shop." They needed to pick up some string and wood if they were going to mimic the techniques they had seen last night.

Finding the required materials had turned out to be a more tedious task than Sarah Jane had expected. They had found a shop—the only one available in the small town that they were in—but had soon discovered that they didn't sell wooden planks. What they did have, though, was a garden roller—a device that was more or less just a barrel with a handle that could be used to flatten plants. It was more expensive but, after some deliberation, Sarah Jane paid for it.

With their new gardening tool in

tow, the two returned to the field in which they had watched Patrick Finch be abducted by a UFO the night before. It was Rani's idea to go there—her logic being that if Finch was in the spaceship then he could not complain when they used his field, and, once they rescued him, he couldn't complain either because without them he would not be home again.

They saw no reason to wait until the fall of night to begin their work—after all, they were not trying to pass their crop circle off as a so-called 'genuine,' were they? That, and it would be easier for them—both novices at what they were doing—to create something suitable in the daylight.

It took a lot of time, as well as trial and error, but, just as the sky began to dim, Sarah Jane and Rani soon found themselves standing next to their own, brand new crop circle. It was hardly the neatest example ever of such a thing—the circle itself was lopsided, and there were multiple clear mistakes scattered around the entire thing—but it would do the job at hand. Besides, the Drel wouldn't see it up close—it didn't need to be absolutely perfect.

And so they waited. When the sun finally set and the sky became that family inky black colour, they turned their eyes upwards. Neither knew how long it would be until the UFO took notice of them—if it even would at all—but both hoped that it would be soon as it was once again a cold night, and the prospect of standing in a field for hours on end hardly seemed like an enjoyable one.

Thankfully, though they did have to wait for a few hours, it was before midnight when a bright light appeared in the sky. "Sarah Jane!" Rani exclaimed, pointing towards it. "There!"

Both watched as the Drel ship danced across the sky at a rapid speed and over to their location. It was an intimidating thing, seeing it from below. Though it wasn't the largest ship Sarah Jane had ever seen, having such a thing hovering directly above…

It had an unprecedented ability to make one feel small.

The beam of light that they had seen the night before flicked on and seemed to flip a switch inside them—both women quickly springing to action as the atmosphere changed. "Right," Sarah Jane, grabbing her mobile and dialling Clyde. "We saw what happened before. We've got a few moments before it finishes scanning the crop circle, and then it'll turn its attention to us. Hopefully we can get through to it before either of us get taken, but we'll split up just in case—but if one of us *does* get taken, don't panic. Remember; they're not bad. They're just confused. Okay?"

Rani nodded in response. "I'll go this way," she said, pointing over her shoulder. Once Sarah Jane nodded in return, Rani began to run. They needed to get distance between them if they were going to split up—the idea behind the action being that if they did such a thing, the UFO could only chase after one of them, buying the other precious time to try and communicate with the Drel.

Just as the phone in Sarah Jane's hand went to voicemail, the ship seemed to finish looking at the crop circle and instead turned its attention to the humans on the ground. Its light seemed to angle back and forth for a moment, as if deciding which women to follow, before, finally, it took off

after Rani.

"Remember!" Sarah Jane shouted to her friend, who was still running. "They're just confused!" Or, at least, she hoped that was the case.

Dialling Clyde again, she put the phone to her ear, one foot tapping nervously as she waiting. "Come on, Clyde," Sarah Jane muttered to herself as she listened for his voice. "Pick up…" But again, there was no answer. What was he *doing*? Inside her head, she found herself begging that he hadn't fallen asleep. No, he wouldn't do that, right? He must just be getting a snack or something and, anyway minute now, he would answer.

A startled shout tore Sarah Jane's attention away from the phone. Across the field, the UFO had finally caught up with Rani and caught her within its beam. She was bravely not screaming, but instead trying to fight it—wiggling and writing in the grip before, finally, she seemed to freeze. Sarah Jane wanted to shout—to drop everything and run to her—but, in that moment, her phone began to ring.

Clyde.

Frantically, she answered. "Clyde, quick—they've got Rani. Mr Smith, can you track our coordinates and contact the ship?"

"Contacting the Drel…"

As the dial tone could be heard over the phone, there was a flash of light and—just like the previous night—when Sarah Jane looked back towards the ship, there was nobody in its beam. There was no time to worry about Rani though. She was brave and could look after herself, plus, the ship had now turned its attention to Sarah Jane.

It zipped over and hovered above her in a way that, if she didn't know better, she would have called threatening. "Any minute now would be great, Mr Smith!" Sarah Jane said into the phone as she felt her feet begin the lift from the ground. It was a strange sensation—hovering. Weightless in a way, but at the same time she knew it was because of an alien spacecraft above her.

And then, finally:

"Communications established."

"Thank you! Hello? Is this the Drel spaceship? I would really appreciate it if you could put me down!"

Over the line, Sarah Jane could hear a strange hissing and clicking in return. The Drel language? She opened her mouth to ask for a translation, but Mr Smith had thought ahead. *"They wish to know who you are, and who the people they have seized are."*

"I'm a friend! I promise! And those people, they mean no harm—they were just trying to have some fun!" Well, Anna was. Finch was presumably attempting to make money.

Again, the Drel replied in their own language before, a moment later, Mr Smith provided his own translation. "They claim that the symbols in the field look like those of their racing rivals."

As Sarah Jane laughed at the absurdity of it—all of this was happening because of some petty joyrider rivalry!—she heard Clyde reply. "No, that's a crop circle, mate! People make them—well, I don't really get why they make them, but they've got nothing to do with you! Honestly, before you came along they didn't even know there was life off this planet!"

It wasn't the reply that Sarah Jane would have gone with herself, but it

seemed to work. Slowly, she felt herself being lowered to the ground again. "Thank you," she said as he feet touched the ground again. "Now I promise, those people, they don't want to compete with you or have anything to do with the Drel. Give them back?"

The chattering clicks got faster as the Drel on the other end of the line seemed to ramble instead. It almost sounded… Panicked? Certainly worried about something.

"They Drel are concerned that you will inform the Shadow Proximation about their actions."

"Oh, no! No, don't worry! Just give them back and we won't tell anybody, I promise!"

That seemed to settle the Drel's worries and, after a little more chattering, there was another flash of light. Forced to close her eyes, Sarah Jane didn't see the spaceship fly away, but she heard it—the faint rumble of engines growing quieter and quieter until they were gone. By the time she could look again, the sky was empty and, by her side were three more people.

Immediately, she rushed forward to hug Rani. "Well done. You did really well," Sarah Jane said as wrapped her arms tightly around the other, undoubtedly proud of her. The hug lasted a few moments before it was interrupted by the sound of Clyde, the phone still on loudspeaker from earlier in the day.

"Uh…so, is everything fine now?"

Both Sarah Jane and Rani laughed at that. "Yes, Clyde. Rani's fine and the Drel are gone. Get some sleep, okay? We'll update you tomorrow." After saying goodbye, she released her friends from her arms and ended the call.

Sarah Jane's attention then turned to the two others with them. The person she really wanted to talk to was Anna—the girl seemed confused and frightened—but, before she could get to her, Finch barged in front of them.

"I don't know who you are, but—but you—" The farmer was stumbling over his words, a finger pointing accusingly at Sarah Jane and Rani despite the fact that he didn't seem to know what to say.

"But I got you off that spaceship, and you should maybe think twice about making money off gullible conspiracy theorists in the future?" Sarah Jane suggested. Finch had no answer to her words. He simply made a frustrated gesture with his arms, glared, then stormed off into the night.

"Good riddance. Now, Anna, is it?" Gently, she approached the missing girl and wrapped a comforting arm around her. "I'm Sarah Jane, and this is my friend Rani. I think it's time we got you home…"

Sarah Jane & The Bristolian Vault

Sophie Iles

Of all the things that Clyde had dealt with in his short time travelling with Sarah Jane, the idea of university was one of the most overwhelming. The sixth form was difficult enough without the endless pressure from his personal statements, his portfolio, and finding his new home and school. Not to mention, even though he was intending to study illustration at university, he still had to do well on his A-Levels to impress his university. That and *he* had to find one that impressed *him*. So far, he was just bored of the motorway. Clyde pressed his head to the glass of the car window, as Rani's voice crackled from his mobile phone speaker.

"—and like I was saying yesterday, you might even get an unconditional offer which means your portfolio impresses them enough to get you in."

"Yeah, well, that's obviously going to happen. You are talking to an artistic genius!"

"Clyde! Don't be so cocky! You might not be the right fit for the university! There's so much to consider!"

"Rani, don't worry about it. I'll figure it out eventually." He paused. He knew Rani well enough that her worrying wasn't necessarily about the subject at hand. "You'll be great for Cambridge too, you know, so don't worry about that either. If you don't get in there, Luke will tell you all the tricks to get into Oxford."

He could hear the worried sigh from the other end. "I don't want to just get handed a place at Oxford. That wouldn't be right…anyway, you'll have fun today with Sarah Jane. This place's got an amazing arts program, and has lots of local arts facilities. It'll be great I'm sure. You must call me when it's all done."

Sarah Jane waved to Clyde to get his attention. She pointed at the mobile whilst she continued to drive. He remembered immediately what she'd wanted him to say. "Oh! Sarah Jane said to tell you, make sure Sky does

her homework. Not that she needs to be reminded."

A laugh from Rani, and she signed off with a promise to make sure. Once Clyde was focused on the road again the motorway had ended. Now they sat in traffic in a rural section of town, moments outside of the large city. The grey concrete flats and offices were covered in more graffiti than Clyde had ever seen. The line of traffic led them towards a large red brick building past large open greenery.

'OPEN DAY' hung above the path, written in red and gold letters.

Eventually they pulled up in the carpark. As Clyde fiddled with his seat belt strap, he looked over to Sarah Jane who had been content, despite the busy roads.

"Thanks for the lift, Sarah Jane."

"Oh don't mention it, I'm happy to. I quite like wandering around university halls. Lots of history."

"I'm not looking for lots of history though, Sarah Jane. I want to go somewhere where there's lots going on."

"Well, we will find out for ourselves, won't we?"

On arriving in the foyer, they were greeted by many tour guides and current students in the university red and gold. One was particularly loud, brandishing pamphlets and shouting for parents and the like to follow for tours.

"Are they all like this?" Clyde asked.

"More or less. Tours of the campuses, some guest lectures about the university, financial lectures on how to get funding, and then actual presentations for each course…"

Clyde titled his head to look at the ceiling and away from the crowds. The woodwork structure of the old buildings, the large ornate ceilings. It reminded him of Oxford. Luke would probably have liked it.

Due to the motorway traffic, they had missed their first art tour, and the canteen wasn't too busy. The pair bought sandwiches and sat down. Hunger evaded, him however, as he looked about the room. Maybe one day he would spend all of his days here. With new friends. Away from the others and Bannerman Road.

"Not eating?" Sarah Jane asked. "That's not like you."

"I'll save it for later," he told her, tucking the packet into his rucksack. "Can we see what else we can do while we wait for the art tour?" He scrambled to get the tour guide's pamphlet spread out on the table.

"All the art ones aren't until later…but there's a speech from the physics professor about…" He frowned. "It doesn't actually say what it's about, odd, but they haven't got his name listed. It also says *first come first serve*…but we were in that hall area and it held over three hundred students?"

"Well that's unusual. Universities are more lax on first names, but, is it a misprint?" Sarah Jane suggested.

"No look, they just list him as the 'professor' on here."

He brandished the sheet of paper to Sarah Jane who shrugged, bemused.

"Can we check it out? Come on, Sarah Jane. I bet he's just a weird old guy who bores us with physics, but it's better than sitting here for an hour before my illustration talk…"

Sarah Jane considered, then gave him a smile. "I don't see why not.

Maybe we'll actually learn a thing or two."

The hall was as packed as the sheet warned. They stood at the back of a circular domed room, seats positioned around a small center stage. A chalkboard stood on the stage—and, beside it, the professor. Clyde was reminded of a villain from an old horror film, except that with the hoodie and suit jacket over the top it suggested he was going through a midlife crisis. He was tall and pencil thin, though that may have only been because of the heavy layers of clothing that made his legs thinner than the rest of him. His boney fingers gesticulated as he spoke to his audience. A smooth Scottish accent escaped his mouth, fierce eyebrows carving into a V as he talked passionately about space, whilst also comparing it to music and Shakespeare.

Clyde turned to Sarah Jane. "Wished he'd taught me science, eh, Sarah Jane?"

But Sarah Jane wasn't listening. Transfixed, her eyes never left the professor, as if she was trying to work out a complicated sum.

"Earth to Sarah Jane?"

Finally, he waved a hand in front of her face.

She blinked. "Sorry, did you say something?"

"I was just saying he's good, that's all."

Sarah Jane nodded, and Clyde's brow furrowed. It wasn't long until the speech was completed to applause. As others darted off to look around the rest of the university, Clyde got up to go, but Sarah Jane took a moment, catching his arm.

"I want to speak to him."

"But Sarah Jane, my illustration lecture!"

Clyde paused at the sharp gaze that Sarah Jane had suddenly given him, and he could feel his insides stiffen. "Okay, okay, but I don't see why? He's just a cool science professor?"

"Maybe, Clyde. Maybe."

There were quite a few potential students at the front of the stage. As they moved through the crowd, Clyde heard a multitude of strange remarks from different people. "Hasn't he aged well," to "He looks the same as he did when I was here over thirty years ago." Clyde was more concerned by the look Sarah Jane gave the professor. Frustration was written all over her face. Did she know him? Was he a friend or an enemy?

As they stood in front of the professor he said nothing. He offered a casual wave at them before putting on a pair of sunglasses. Clyde noticed he was now tucking hands into his jacket instead of throwing them around as he'd been before.

"And how may I help you?"

Clyde blurted it out before Sarah Jane could speak. "Why are you wearing sunglasses?"

"Why are you wearing trainers? Because you choose to. Next question."

Sarah Jane folded her arms, eyes focused on the professor. Her intent was set.

"Quite a remarkable lecture on Shakespeare and corresponding star clusters. Very impressive."

"Well, I try to be? Tough entertaining teenagers when there's YouTube." Another smile, larger this time. "I really should be getting away, lots to do to prepare for the degree show this year."

He raised his hands in surrender as he slid away through the crowd. If Clyde didn't know any better, he would say he was running away. Clyde turned to tell to Sarah Jane, but the professor spoke again.

"Oh, and enjoy the Illustration lecture, Clyde!"

As he turned down the hallway out of sight, amid the rabble of students and parents exiting, Clyde and Sarah Jane shared the same expression.

"So, how did he know my name?"

"I don't know. But I think we'd best find out, don't you?"

The professor scrambled to his office and closed the door, locking it three times, before leaning against it with a sigh. That had been too close—

"Sir!"

The professor jumped a good half a meter into the air. He turned round to find his butler, or whatever he was calling himself these days. The butler's arms were crossed, his eyes dark.

"What in blazes are you doing standing there? Trying to kill an old man?"

"If surprising you would do that, I'd have tried it years ago."

His eyebrows raised at the dig before he turned back to the keyhole. Behind him the bald-headed figure in his parka coat continued tapping his foot. It reminded him of a mother upset that her son was late for curfew.

"And what exactly are you doing?"

"Hiding."

"Hiding? From who?"

The professor twisted and watched his butler with a look of trepidation. But a smile was on his lips when he found the best description for her.

"My best friend, who else?"

Clyde wished they had just tucked into their sandwiches. He didn't like this. Why did the professor know who he was? Why did he not want to speak to them, really, if he did? And how did he have as much knowledge about the stars?

"Even I struggle with those concepts and I've been out in space," Sarah Jane explained as they looked for a university map whilst trying to be inconspicuous. On finding an empty corridor, she pulled out her scanner watch. It hummed with energy.

"It's suggesting there is alien life here," she explained to Clyde, smirking. "We were right to suspect. There's seismic alien activity going in the university—" She spun round a moment, before she pointed at the campus map. "Up in one of those offices…fourth floor…and then…we have a dead signal area right by the maintenance room…or that's what the map suggests. Could be an entirely different structure than what's on the map."

Clyde frowned as he looked at the university map then back to her.

"But what does that mean to us?"

"Well, there must be activity, Clyde, because there's a void space. Nothing. Not even signs of energy signals, which is even more interesting. You don't go that lengths to block signals…unless you have something to hide."

Sarah Jane's eyes glistened—the way they always did when there was a mystery to be solved.

"Think you can handle looking for the professor on your own, Clyde?"

"Obviously, what's an old bloke like that going to be able to do to me?

What are you going to do?"

She pointed at the map. "That void space. I need to know what it is. Meet me back in the cafe in half an hour. If I'm not back, call and ask Mr Smith to track my location. He'll have stronger equipment." Before Clyde could even retort, she was already off.

"But Sarah Jane, my illustration lecture!" he huffed, before, sighing, he headed off back towards the lecture rooms. At least he was able to use his actual reason to be there to make him look like he was in awe of the place, playing the innocent uni student wannabe. He didn't have to try too hard. The art room he walked past was the bigger than his sixth forms.

No, Clyde, you said to Sarah Jane you would look into the professor's room, he schooled himself.

He skipped a up a set of stairs to find the Lecturers offices. Out of all the doors, it was almost impossible to miss the professor's room. The name tag was SMITH with a pair of sunglasses above it. The engraving was old and peeling.

Clyde moved towards the door and heard raised voices. One voice he recognised as the professor. The other he didn't, but it sounded like he was whining the way he did at his mum when he didn't want to do something.

"You could just ignore her? You were able to avoid Chesterton—"

"Well, that's not the same point. Chesterfield didn't know I could change, I don't think, and he's got that whole memory thing. No, this is completely different. She's different. She'll see through this and we both know what will happen if she does."

Clyde stayed perfectly still, trying to stop even breathing as he stood.

"So what are you going to do?"

"Do?"

"Yes, do. What are you going to do with Sarah Jane Smith?"

And unable to hold back anymore, Clyde slammed through the professor's door.

It was remarkably easy to hide something here, if you could get past the student tour guides. Sarah Jane watched as intrigued parents were directed away from the back of the university campus. Though she didn't suspect the students had anything to do with it, that wouldn't have surprised her. She'd taken on evil universities before. The important thing was that she needed to get past. As luck would have it, one parent desperately needed to find their son; as they moved, the last wall of defense cleared for Sarah Jane to pass the building block, and to follow her scanner watch. She'd walked past was a caretakers room, and a few boilers round the back. No sign of anything alien. She then came to a doorway. KEEP OUT was written in scrawled handwriting on paper. Handwriting she recognised. With a flick of her sonic lipstick, the door opened and she was inside.

At the bottom of the stairs on her right hand side was a large vaulted door with three circular handles. As she reached it, she knocked four times with the back of her hand. The sound vibrated around the room. Interesting.

Though not as interesting as four knocks back in the same pattern.

She tested her voice. "Hello?"

There was a sound, through the metal, or whatever material it was. So she pointed her sonic towards the doors, in the hope to get it open. No

such luck.

"I'm afraid that won't work." The two-way speaker system was just above Sarah's head, and set within the door. The voice came from there. "I'm stuck in here for eternity. It's probably best you just leave me be."

Sarah Jane wasn't going to give up that easily. She found a circular nodule and pressed it. "Can you hear me?"

"Oh, aren't you clever! Usually I'm just talking to myself." The voice was female, possessing a Scottish accent. "Listen, it really isn't safe for you here. You're in danger and this vault door is tightly locked. No one can get me out, I tell you…"

Sarah Jane smiled. "Yes, well, that's part of my job description: doing things people don't think are possible. I'm Sarah Jane Smith.'

There was a pause. A longer pause than Sarah Jane would have liked, before the voice replied.

"Hello, Sarah Jane Smith…I'm… well, I'm a prisoner here, being kept by a madman…are you really sure you can open this door?"

Sarah Jane already rolled up the sleeves of her jacket.

"I'm very sure I can do just that. But I'd better call in someone that's good with security doors…"

"I don't understand?" Clyde said, his eyes flickered between the butler, or whatever they'd called him, and the professor, both of which had their hands raised in surrender. "What do you mean, she's in danger?"

"We haven't got time to start chatting, Clyde, we have to go."

"Go where!?"

"To find Sarah."

Clyde stepped back as both of them rushed past him into the corridor. The professor began checking his pockets, producing a blue and silver item. It looked a little like a wand. He pointed at the door once everyone was outside. He heard the door lock; but the wand's whirring noise sounded familiar. Clyde stared at him with disbelief.

"Wait! Are—is that—"

"Well, who else were you expecting? No time for chitchat. We have to go, now. Before Sarah does the thing I really don't want her to do."

The recognition caused Clyde not only to grin, but to feel even more confused. If this was who he thought it was…but he was older looking now, fiercer…

But why didn't he say hello earlier? Why didn't he tell Sarah Jane who he really was?

"What is it you don't want her to do?"

"Open the Vault. Who knows what will happen to her if she does…"

"—and who's a good boy? Thank you both for working together so well. Thank you so much. Any problems, I'll call you, Mr. Smith."

The phone call over, schematics downloaded, Sarah drew her arm down the center of the door with her sonic lipstick outstretched. The buzzing amplified. She pressed the communication button. "I'm just waiting for the sonic to reach its maximum pitch, and then I'll be able to get you out," Sarah Jane told the person inside, as she mentally went over the warnings about not overloading the door.

"Oh, thank you. Thank you so much, Sarah Jane Smith…."

"Have you been in there long?"

"Long enough…."

Sarah could hear the disdain in the voice this time. Tilting her head, Sarah pressed again on the voice activator. "Why are you a prisoner? Why did they keep you here?"

"Apparently it's for my own good. He's a crazy man, I tell you. Completely lost his mind. He's not seeing sense."

The sonic's buzzing noise only grew.

Almost completely high pitched.

Sparks crackled from the lock. It reminded her of putting metal in a microwave.

"Stand back! It's almost ready!"

The lock cracked again. Cogs tumbled out of place. The door fell away. Everything inside was stark, bright white. Sarah Jane couldn't see much, but she stepped inside without any hesitation.

"Hello? The door's open. We should be heading off. I can see if I can get you home…where are you?"

"I'm further in. I'll be with you in a moment."

Sarah paced slowly through the light. In front of her it was just white, as far as she could make out. A strange metallic smell lingered in the air. She opened her mouth to speak.

Then the crackling returned. She turned.

The doors started to gradually shift back together.

"No! No, that's not right!" By the time she had dashed back, the door was too tightly closed for her to squeeze through. With a resounding noise, the metal clasped together. It was over.

"I'll call them back—get it open…"

A voice came from behind her, moving slowly through the bright light.

"This is a dead zone, dear. Here. Let's ease this intense light shall we?" Bulbs flickered to darkness and then back on again. This time an orange, natural light illuminated their surroundings. They were inside a large hall. A piano sat in the centre. Fine armchairs and heaters were placed next to them. "So that's that, Miss Smith. No phones. No nothing. You're in here now, just like me."

The woman smiled, and Sarah's worry amplified. The voice had been soft. This time, it had a more sardonic tone.

"Did you set me up?"

"Me? No, of course I didn't. You'd know if I had. You were an unexpected guest. It's been a long time I've had anyone but him and the bald one to talk to…but no, Sarah Jane Smith. You were as surprised to find me here as I was to hear your voice in my speaker."

"Then why aren't you angry? Why aren't you desperate to leave?"

The woman smiled. The lines twisted on her face into something more like a sneer. "I'm sure you won't be here long, once he realises you're here."

"Who?"

"My abductor, of course. The idiot with the hair. You wait. He'll let you out in no time at all…that is, if I don't decide to kill you first."

Outside the university, the weather had turned. Clyde pulled his hoodie closer as he stared up into the dark sky that circled them.

"That wind came quickly."

He turned on his heels to see that

the professor had stopped. The thin man licked his finger and raised it to the air, eyebrows knitted together.

"That's not good."

"The clouds?"

"That's a sudden change in atmospheric pressure, one that isn't natural. Something is happening…"

"You don't think we're too late, do you?" the butler called as he got close to the boiler room door. The other two were behind him, still staring up at the storm.

"We'll have to see for ourselves."

Clyde clambered after them, unable to help the uneasiness in his stomach. He grimaced as he followed down deeper into the maintenance section of the university. The butler whimpered as he pointed at the Vault door. A figure, dressed in black, stood in front of the Vault.

A figure that Clyde knew immediately.

A shroud of evil, with a white face and fangs. Vacant valley shaped holes were set in its face instead of eyes.

Clyde stepped back from the door, as his colleagues stepped forward.

Its voice echoed throughout the room, Clyde's shoulders hunched uncomfortably at the familiar noise.

"So glad to meet you again, after all this time…"

The butler, alarmed, tapped the professor's shoulder. "So who's this?"

The professor brightened, clasping his friend's arm, as if greeting two old work acquaintances.

"Ahh, of course, you won't have met. This is the Trickster. Part of the Pantheon of Discord. You really like picking on Sarah, don't you? Don't you have any other humans to bully? There's plenty." He gave Clyde a look. "Sorry, but it is true. There are a lot of you."

Clyde, however, was still too interested in the door.

"Where is she? Where's Sarah Jane?" Clyde asked, hands squeezed into fists at his sides.

"Inside the Vault. As I planned."

"What?"

Everyone but the Trickster seemed to ask that question, and asked with the same definitive refusal to believe it. The professor went to rush forwards, but the Trickster held up his hand. "It is locked, even from you, time traveller. It will only open with your agreement."

But it was Clyde who answered. "And what's that, huh? Come on, spit it out!"

The Trickster smiled, if you could call whatever it was doing with his mouth a smile.

"I will only let Sarah Jane Smith go if you break your vow, and release your prisoner."

The professor went very still, and Clyde watched him go very white, almost as white as that mess of hair. "And if I refuse your agreement?"

"Sarah Jane Smith will remain in the Vault, unable to be removed, and her future travels and adventures will cease to happen…just as her child will also cease to exist…"

And with that bombshell, the Trickster laughed and vanished out of sight.

The three men stared hopelessly at the impossible vault door.

Sarah Jane Smith eyed the other woman carefully. She, however, simply gestured for Sarah Jane to follow. The two armchairs were perfectly placed

for conversation. With a coffee table between them, two cups, a kettle, and a teapot, it was cozy. She took her seat with ease before patting the other arm.

"So, let's have a girls chat. I do love those." The Scottish drawl sounded more vicious than ever. Sarah Jane couldn't believe she ever trusted that voice through the speaker.

"No, thank you, I need to find a way out."

"Look, sweetheart, take it from me. If I can't get out, you can't."

Sarah Jane ignored the comment. She walked around the walls, scanner watch out as she tried to decipher any sort of energy readings or signals. Anything she could use to get a message out, or work out what these walls were made of. Her prison-mate poured hot water into the teapot.

"It's technology from my homeworld. Even if you could get a signal out, he won't release you. It's too much of a risk."

Tightening her jaw, Sarah Jane stepped back towards the woman.

"So who are you, or what are you, if you really are that much of a risk?"

The woman merely smiled, stirring her little teapot. The tinkling noise was repetitive and melodic. "I'm like him, that old friend of yours. We've been playing cops and robbers across all time and space for so many years. Would have thought we'd have spoken properly, after that matter with the president, but you were a bit busy."

"You…were…"

"I was, but I looked a little different then."

Sarah Jane turned away again, but she was stopped dead in her tracks by the next question.

"So, come on, woman to woman. When's she due?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your baby, silly. When are you due?"

Sarah Jane unconsciously wrapped both arms around herself, and refused to look at her host.

"It is none of your business…."

"Oh, I see, still hasn't sunk in yet? I suppose Luke and Sky are rather jealous…"

It was enough to break her cool. Red faced, hands tight at her side, she turned to face her host with a level of anger reserved for some of her worst enemies. "Don't you dare mention my children again."

The woman sipped her tea out of her bone china cup. Steam rose, and behind it, the woman remained relaxed and calm. "Oh, I do love it when I hit a nerve. You know, this tea might go cold. If I wanted to kill you quickly, I would have done it by now. Might as well savour your life—and your tea—whilst you still have it. I am rather keen on two for the price of one, but tea first. Now, do you take sugar, dear?"

The professor still hadn't moved from his spot.

Clyde bounced between him and the bald butler. "So? What are we going to do? We have to do something! If you are who I think you are, you're usually pretty good at fixing these things, so you have to fix it!"

The butler pushed his fingers together. "Sir?"

The professor shook his head, opening then shutting his mouth.

The ground shook.

All of them were thrown off balance as the boiler room around them

abruptly disappeared. The metallic stairs and walls faded into cliff faces and stone. The only thing that remained was the Vault, and themselves, just as they were. A terrific pink sky formed above them, lightning flashing through it.

"Oh no…not again." Clyde whined, as they were swept by mist and ash.

The butler stammered, tugging on the professor's arm. "Sir! Where's the university, where's—where is everyone?"

Clyde answered instead. "I've seen this before. This is an alternate timeline…this is the future that we face if….if the agreement is made."

The professor got back to his feet. But he only continued to stare at the Vault, gaze heavy. Clyde grabbed onto his arm.

"Professor, whoever you are. What do we do?"

The professor opened his mouth, eyes gentle, eyebrows raised sorrowfully. But then his face changed.

"We run. WE RUN NOW!"

With that, he grabbed the butler and Clyde, and dragged them away.

Two shapes followed. Clyde glanced over his shoulder. He thought they were supposed to be wolves, But what should have been fur was scales. They had elongated necks, eyes completely hidden under the scale-like fur and fierce layers of sharp teeth. Their noses sniffed, and they roared. Teeth gnawed together and horrific howling escaped them.

They sprang after Clyde and the others.

Sarah Jane sat in the opposing armchair, but the teacup only remained in her lap. The other woman shifted in her chair with ease and poured more tea into her cup.

"—so now you know all of it. My relationship with your old crush, and our tiff across the stars."

"You're a monster," Sarah Jane stated, indignant.

"Oh, quite. I've been a lot of things. Still prefer it to what he calls heroism. He's killed just as many people as I have over the centuries. What's really the difference here?" She sipped her tea. "He just feels more guilt about it."

Sarah Jane put down her cup with a screech of china, tea still untouched.

"Enough talking, I will find a way out of here…"

"I believe we've gone over this, there's no way out of here—"

But the other woman didn't get to finish speaking. The same shadowy figure dressed in black appeared before them. The same toothy smile that haunted Sarah Jane's nightmares. The same creature that had been tearing through her past to destroy her future for the last four years.

"You."

"Sarah Jane Smith. How are you enjoying your stay?"

No matter how fast and far they ran, the wolves kept pace. The professor's wild run meant nothing with the terrifying scaly wolf like creatures on their tail.

Then he pointed. Clyde grabbed his knees as they came to a quick stop. "Quick, if we get up the alcove we can hide for a while!"

"Sir! They're too close!"

"Then we need to distract them."

"And I have just the distraction." Tearing off his rucksack, Clyde pulled

out his untouched sandwich and started to wave it. "Oi! Chaos Hounds! Whatever you are!" And with a determined throw, he lobbed the entire packet towards them and over their heads.

They raced after it. He caught up with the professor and the butler as they climbed the small cliff to temporary safety. His lungs ached as he gasped for air. The teenager just couldn't believe his eyes. There was nothing—no buildings, no greenery, no animals sans those terrible monsters. A desolate sun. He thought of what he and Rani had seen last time the Trickster had shown them a possible reality, of what had happened to the human race.

But there was no sign of anything this time. No humans, no nothing. The planet was dead…

"Nice trick there."

"Thanks?" Clyde said miserably.

"Not sure on the name though, but we'll stick with Chaos Hounds for now, eh?"

Clyde waved in a panic, his chest still sore from the running. "This is getting us nowhere…we need to stop this!" He looked out in despair at the world around them.

The professor growled. If he had been a cat, you could have seen the way his ears pricked up in dangerous alarm. "Do you think it's that straight forward? You heard the agreement. I can't just release Sarah, I have to let my prisoner go. This is why this land is so chaotic. You think the Trickster is trouble, imagine them with an assistant just as dangerous…imagine the Trickster with their own chaotic equal, and that's my prisoner."

"Then what do we do, sir?" the butler asked, terror rising in his voice.

"There's nothing we can do…either way, we lose…" But though it sounded like the end of the sentence, Clyde thought he heard an addition to the sentence, soft and barely audible. "…I lose."

The prisoner spoke first. She placed down her tea and stood between Sarah Jane and the Trickster. "I don't believe we've been introduced. Am I crashing a party for two? If so, this is an odd place for it."

"This is the Trickster," Sarah Jane said. "We've met a few times. None of them good."

The prisoner grinned, her eyes wide. "Oh, oh I've heard of you. There were many stories about the Pantheon of Discord when I was a tot…must admit, I'm quite a fan."

The hairs on Sarah Jane's arm stood up, as the Trickster laughed, amused at the response.

"And I know of you. A champion of death who now has so many names."

"Oh, stop it now, don't make me blush."

Sarah Jane backed off, wanting to create more distance between her and the monsters that were becoming a more threatening pair as the seconds passed.

"You will not be in this vault for much longer. Her friend has an agreement to make. Soon, you and I will create chaos across the universe. Your future will be yours to roam as you please, with my agreement."

Sarah Jane shook her head. "Is that what this is about? Tricking him into letting us both go? I won't be a part of it."

And the Trickster laughed, so much so, that even the prisoner's malice-filled gaze could not compare.

"I think it's already too late, Sarah Jane Smith."

And to her horror, behind her, the Vault doors started to open.

"Time has been affected, but not space. This is still Bristol. What remains of it."

"What would happen if they find us? If…they get hold of us?"

"Consume you whole whilst you scream, probably. The planet probably has little food left for the beasts. They feed off the living. We're basically an unexpected desert and they've been starving…no wonder they ate your sandwiches"

"Oh. Lovely." If the butler was used to this cold approach, Clyde sure wasn't.

"And what do we do when we get back to the Vault?"

"Stop the Trickster, of course. What else would we do?"

But Clyde could see his slumped back and sorrowful expression; the professor couldn't see a way out of this. The Trickster had truly tricked him.

"Professor, I think you should know something."

"Go on."

"The last time we faced the Trickster, it was really bad. I wasn't there but…Rani and Luke told me they tried to break time in 1951, by giving Sarah Jane the way to save her parents from dying in a car accident. Sarah Jane couldn't kill her own parents to save the world. Her parents made that choice, instead…"

The old man didn't respond at first. His eyebrows just furrowed. He barked at the butler, who had taken a pew on a nearby rock.

"Get up, will you? We can't stay here. We've got to get back to the Vault. As quickly as we can."

As they walked there was silence they could see the Vault now in distance, just close enough. They had to be urgent, but slow on their approach. They couldn't afford to have the chaos hounds on them again.

The professor tapped Clyde on the shoulder.

"The Trickster thinks he's beaten me, Clyde, don't you see?" His smile was grim. "Sarah Jane Smith is a much better person than I've ever been. We need to stop the Trickster another way, because the current options aren't good enough and we need to win this." But even as they reached the Vault, even as the stirring thought of success being their only option was starting to give Clyde hope, he didn't expect the doors to open.

The professor reached out to them, his wand buzzing frantically in his hand—as though trying to stop it. The storm around them more intense than ever before.

"No—no no no! Don't you dare! No no no no!"

The Vault doors opened all the way. Sarah Jane looked through to see three figures, one she knew as the professor, a man wearing a parka coat, and then, of course, Clyde. The last one rushed forward and pulled her into a protective hug.

Behind her, the Trickster laughed.

Sarah Jane had to know the truth.

"How—the doors how—"

Clyde shrugged, bewildered. "We

don't know—we were just getting back…"

They both turned to the professor and the butler, who were now watching the Trickster and the woman. Clyde felt like he was on the set of an old western. A standoff was waiting to happen.

"You've lost…chaos will reign here on Earth. There will be no hope for the human race…"

Sarah Jane let go of Clyde to look at the professor. "You really are a stubborn old man, aren't you?"

But before the professor could reply, the prisoner piped up.

"Excuse me, but I didn't say I agreed to anything at all." She had gone back to finishing her tea. The professor blinked, his eyes starting to widen as she continued to talk.

"Whilst I might like a good deal of chaos, I am no one's agent but my own. What's in it for me, really? I think I'd prefer to stay here."

The Trickster looked just as shocked as everyone else, and that shock quickly turned to anger. A roar flooded the room. Sarah Jane held onto Clyde's arm.

"You do not understand what you are doing. If you do not agree, you will die."

The prisoner put down her now finished cup of tea, hands on hips. She meant business.

"Look, sweetheart, as tempting as it is to go all chaotic with you on Earth, I'd like to leave this cell of mine on my own terms with my jailer's permission…where's the fun in just walking out?"

The Trickster screamed in fury.

"Terribly sorry, old boy." The prisoner gave a wink towards the professor, who was too shocked to speak. She raised her arms as though she was giving a mighty Shakespearean performance. "But I denounce your agreement."

The mist and darkness of the chaotic world swirled dramatically, pulsing into nothingness. As the world of chaos shifted everyone was thrown off their feet. The power of the Trickster was torn away from him. They observed with horror as what should have been his new world faded out of existence. With a last desperate movement, the Trickster reached for Sarah Jane but Clyde kept hold of her.

"This isn't over!" He screamed as he seemed to fade in front of them. "It will never be over!" and then he, too, pulsed out of existence, a flash of bright light and everything went still. Clyde looked round him to see everything seemed back to normal. Outside the Vault doors was the maintenance staircase. Everything was back to normal.

"Are you okay?" Clyde asked Sarah as he went to stand, hand out to pull his friend to his feet. She was paler than he'd seen her in a long time, her hand on her stomach.

"Yes, I'm fine." She put a hand to his cheek. "I'm fine Clyde, thank you." He couldn't help but notice the frown that was aimed towards the professor. He had also stood. The prisoner did not take his hand to stand. She looked towards the open door before looking away again.

As the butler and Clyde stepped away towards the exit, Sarah Jane observed the two rivals who stood apart, observing each other. Or was it more than that? It made her skin crawl.

"It's time to go," Sarah Jane told

the professor. The longer they stayed, the more temptation there was.

The professor opened his mouth to speak but the prisoner came forward. She put her finger on his lips to silence him. "I think your pet there probably has a good idea. We'll have to have a chat another time about today's events. Don't you think?"

He nodded. "Soon."

"Soon," she agreed, glee dancing in her eyes. "I'll make tea."

The professor moved away from her to Sarah Jane. His expression didn't change. There seemed to be so much hanging over this man. What had happened to him? Did she even want to know?

The prisoner turned her attention, then, to Sarah Jane. There was something about the way their eyes met that made her feel like a child, and that only angered her more.

"It was lovely to meet you, Sarah Jane Smith. Do stay in touch. Maybe I'll kill you next time."

"I highly doubt you'll have that opportunity," Sarah Jane retorted, knots in her stomach.

"Oh, we'll see. There's always the future to consider. Isn't that right, old friend?"

The professor took Sarah Jane's upper arm to tug her away, and though Sarah Jane would have liked to continue sparring…who knew how much more danger they were in?

Shrugging off his touch, they stepped towards the door together. Clyde and the butler stood waiting outside. Wordlessly, his wand crackled with life. The mechanical cogs start to move together. They shifted into place and by the look on everyone's faces Sarah Jane knew they all started to feel safer. That was, until the Scottish drawl called from inside over the noise.

"Oh, and another thing. Doesn't this whole venture prove my point? About kindness?"

"What about it?" the professor replied.

"It'll kill you in the end. Don't you forget it."

And with no reply, and a heavy metallic thud, the Vault was finally closed.

The open day was almost over. The vending machine served as the only thing left open now, which produced a coffee and a hot chocolate for both the butler and Clyde. If it was possible he was paler than ever.

Clyde looked up from his cup. "Who was she…the woman in the vault…?"

The butler blew on his coffee. "I don't think I'm the right person to tell you."

"She saved Sarah Jane's life today, I—"

"Saved? Clyde, that person is one of the most dangerous in the universe…wouldn't think less about killing you the moment she laid eyes on you, in any number of vicious ways."

Clyde shuddered, the level of contempt met with the same level of horror that was on his face. "So, why does he keep her in a Vault? Why…doesn't he give her to the Judoon or something?"

For the first time all day, not only did the butler crack a smile, but he burst into such howling laughter his coffee spilt all over his coat. Furiously he tapped at the coat, as if that would fix it. "You really think the Judoon

could handle her?"

Clyde raised his shoulders in a shrug, hiding a laugh at the butler's distress. "Well, I don't know, do I? Aren't there any other space police that can sort her out?"

"That's what sir is trying to do. Sort her out. Though I don't know who's the bigger idiot, but I promised my mistress I would stay and help, regardless of his plans. Maybe it'll work."

"What will work?"

"He's making her good. He wants to make her better."

Clyde didn't know it was possible to frown more than he already was. "—and is that even possible?"

The butler went back to his coffee, or what remained of it, anyway. "Only time will tell, Clyde, and they've got just under 950 years to find out."

Sarah Jane didn't talk for a long while as they stood in the professor's office. Perhaps they both knew there was a lot to talk about: too much to talk about, and not enough time to do it. Time. A burden to them both, it seemed. "So, university then?" came the Scottish drawl. Sarah Jane had been in her own thoughts, as she looked up to meet his face once more.

"Sorry?"

"Clyde, Open Day. All those wonderful youngsters, well, not so young anymore."

Sarah Jane decided she couldn't quite meet his eye—that she wasn't ready to do that just yet. Instead, she let her eyes graze over his desk. A smile grew, as she recognised someone in one of the photos, a girl in a hat. She tenderly stroked the frame. She decided to ask a question of her own.

"Did you really not want me to know it was you, after the lecture?"

His jaw tightened; she could see it clearly in that gaunt face. There was something about it, so open, so expressive. There was no way he could lie to her with this face, even if he wanted to.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I need to keep people from knowing about the Vault."

"Yes, and your friend…who told me exactly what she did when she was free to roam the universe. Is this really the best place for you to hide a monster like that? Is it—" Sarah Jane cut herself off. As though she can't even call him that name. She sees so little of that man in him at that moment. "There are thousands of people on this site alone, and the population of Bristol—failing that, the population of Earth. Just her being released was powerful enough for the Trickster to control the entire planet, and you think it will be fine just leaving everything as it was?"

"Sarah Jane, I have everything under control."

Rare as it was to hear her name from his lips in full, it only tightened Sarah Jane's stomach into larger knots. "Didn't look like it to me. If it wasn't for your friend deciding to stay today, it would have had another ending entirely, and everyone would have died! Not just me, but everyone!"

"I was working on it, Sarah. I was working on making sure that didn't happen. I had to make sure you live. You have no idea how—with everything that's coming, everything that happens next. You're a vital part of that."

"But once upon a time you told me that time isn't that fixed. That everything is in flux. Were you lying to me then, or are you lying to me now?"

He couldn't answer. His face fell, and his eyes no longer met hers. He had become someone she *does* recognise. After a moment before she moved to him, and took his boney hand in hers, squeezing it. Wordlessly, he squeezed it back. They stood that way for a long moment, connected only by touch.

"I don't want to fight with you, I…as always, I'm never quite sure if this time is…the last time. Maybe that's why I find it easier to forgive you."

"I'm not sure I deserve forgiveness, Sarah Jane Smith."

"Don't be so melodramatic…!"

They still held hands. She observed them with such concern. She'd never seen him so old, even though she was barely one to talk. But now her old friend was aging too. How long had it really been since they'd last met?

"What about UNIT?"

"What about them?"

Sarah Jane smirked this time. Oh, she knew this was better. "You know they're still around as much as I do. Perhaps they can help you with your friend?"

"I don't think so." The tone was stern, but Sarah Jane tilted her head.

"And how are you so sure?"

"You don't want to know the full story. It's a mess."

"Either way, UNIT is better prepared to take care of her than you."

The old man laughed, but she watched as his eyes seem to focus elsewhere, thinking, calculating. She smiled at him, and gave his hand a squeeze to get his attention back. "Please, just don't keep this to yourself. You know, if you need help, there are people who will help you…even if they think you're being foolish."

He smiled at her this time, a slow dawning smile.

"When did you become so wise, Sarah?"

"My best friend was the best professor the universe had to offer."

"And I bet you taught him a thing or two about friends in the process."

Their hands untangled regretfully as she turned to check the time. "I should be getting Clyde back home…the M4 isn't the best to drive on a Saturday…" She looked up at him. The towering gothic frame he had taken on gave her his furrowed eyebrows and guarded grin. It set her resolve. "I'll call UNIT for you. I'll be there for you, and so will they. You always have your friends, if you remember to reach out to them."

Now that they were further apart the smile was gone. The professor nodded, lost for words. There were still so many questions, and still not enough answers, but this would have to do.

"Oh, and Sarah?"

Sarah Jane turned on the spot, by the door of the office, to face him. There was a smile there, crinkled at the edges. A fuller one than she'd seen all day, not even in the lecture hall before all the chaos.

"She's going to be okay. Everything is going to be fine. You don't have to worry about them."

He hand went to her stomach. She didn't realise straight away why her face was wet, until she blinked a few times. "Them?"

"Sorry, it's a secret. It's a nice secret this time."

And with that, Sarah just rushed at him, her friend. She squeezed him in a hug. His arms were tight around her.

"Thank you…thank you so much."

"No, thank you, Sarah Jane Smith. Until the next time."

"Until the next time," she replied earnestly, before she detangled herself from his long arms, and before she could change her mind, she rushed out the door.

Sarah Jane's car was the last one in the visitor car park. Clyde looked over the auburn sky that greeted them as they exited, back towards the towering building of the university when his phone finally went off. He cancelled the call. He had seen Sarah was red-eyed, and thought maybe it not best to answer a call from the others just yet.

"You could have taken that."

"It's Rani, I'll call back in a sec…." He paused, his eyes gentle. "Are you okay?"

Sarah's hand rested on her stomach again, then nodded to Clyde.

"I think so, Clyde. I think so. Thank you…what matters now is that it's over. We should be getting home."

His phone buzzed again. Looking at the smiling face staring up at him, he knew he couldn't hang up a second time.

"You'd better answer it. She'll want to hear about everything."

The moment he answered, Rani's voice screeched in his ear. "Why haven't you or Sarah Jane been answering your phones? I've been phoning for the last hour! Anyway, tell me, then…spill the beans! How was it? Are you going to go to this uni then? Enough action for you?"

Clyde and Sarah Jane shared a look as she started the car.

"Seriously, Rani, I think there was just a bit too much going on here, to be honest. Let's see how the next one checks out…"

Full Circle

M.H. Norris

It had been a few years since Maria Jackson had returned to her home country; university had kept her quite busy stateside. Her flight had barely touched down in Heathrow when she'd gotten a call.

It was good to be home.

Customs, baggage claim, and fighting her way through the tide of people took far longer than she'd prefer, especially with the promise of an adventure waiting. Eventually, she saw Sky waving.

"Maria!" The young woman rushed to hug her. "Did mum tell you? We have to help a poet!"

"She called me as my plane was landing. Where are we off to?"

When Maria saw the poet, it was as if she'd come straight out of her childhood. Apparently Earth must be a tourist destination for Star Poets from Arcateen Five. This was the second she'd seen. Unfortunately, both had issues getting back off planet.

With caution, they approached the ethereal being. After seeing plenty of species over the years, Maria found herself with a newfound appreciation for just how…alien this one looked. She was pure light and beautiful.

"Greetings, Star Poet," Sky said, softly. "My mother received your distress call and we've come to help you fix your transportation off world. I'm Sky and this is Maria."

"I am Am'i." The alien nodded her head respectfully. "You can help me?"

Sky nodded, shrugging off her backpack and opening it up. "My mum has helped a couple of your people over the years."

"You're Sarah Jane Smith's daughter?" Am'i's eyes grew wide. "I have heard stories about her bravery. She helped my mentor return home."

Maria took the tool kit Sky provided.

"Maria, it might be better if you do this. If I get too tense…I've been known to not agree with electricity."

Nodding, Maria held out her hand and Am'i pulled out a silver disk, just like the one she'd seen in Sarah Jane's hands all those years ago. Following Sky's directions—that she either got from her mother or Luke—she carefully filed the device. It gave a hum and glowed.

Am'i's face lit up. "Thank you, Maria and Sky."

Part of her had thought she'd imagined the majesty of her first alien's departure. That the idea formed by a young girl who had just how big the universe was would be jaded by a woman who had seen the good, bad, and ugly of time and space.

That wasn't the case. Am'i's ethereal light burned brighter, but not so bright that she needed to look away. A peaceful smile was on Am'i's face as a song formed, one she not only heard but felt.

Quickly, almost so quick you could miss it, Am'i was away from Earth and heading home. Perhaps Maria and Sky's names would join Sarah Jane's in stories of courage and bravery.

That was a weird thought.

Maria handed the toolbox back to the Sky. "Did your mother ever tell you the story of how I discovered aliens were real?"

Letters from the Heart

Anne-Laure Tuduri

To: Blueboxgirl@smith.com
From: Lily@smith.com

Subject Header: School Update

Hello Grandma!

Once again, thank you so much for the noise-cancelling headphones! The big city is turning out to be even more full of noise and more tiring than I expected it to be, and you know how I get when there's too much auditory input around me…I really do miss our little country house sometimes if I'm being honest. Not that I don't like it here! School hasn't started yet, so I had time to figure the town out and find which route to take to get to class (I've already done the journey multiple times, just to be sure I got the timing right).

Frankly, I'm glad things are settling down a bit for me, because all this change has been really stressful, but I guess I am doing just fine on my own now.

I am looking forward to meeting new people, though after spending so much time with you I can't help but wonder how many random persons on the street actually come from the stars.

Is a city as big as London such a hotspot for otherworldly encounters as your good old cottage? I guess I am not very likely to find that out. Which is probably for the better, I really do need to focus on my studies and would like to not be disturbed by an alien invasion. If only for a few months. That's not too much to ask right? I do love alien cultures, but I would prefer avoiding the ones that want to conquer and destroy everything.

Anyway, I can't wait to finally start art school! I'll keep in touch regularly so don't worry too much about me alright?

Love,
Lily

To: Lily@smith.com
From: Blueboxgirl@smith.com

Subject Header: Re: School Update

I'm really glad to hear you are doing fine! I know you probably think I'm just being a fussy old grandma, but I do worry about you.

Did you already go to Bannerman Road? I'm sure Rani would really appreciate it if you visited. You could even say hi to Mr. Smith for me! Sadly, I'm afraid I am getting a bit too old to visit as regularly as before…

Over here, things haven't changed much since you left. I've had a few old UNIT friends over last week, where we chatted about old times over tea and scones. You would have liked it. We spent the entire afternoon reminiscing about the invasions we helped foil, and the worlds and wonders I've seen. I know alien cultures are your special interest, so I asked Harry for some pictures and files which I will send you via the post (we can never be too careful after all!).

Speaking of your study of cultures, I have a few contacts in London that could be of interest to you. As I know you aren't that fond of interviews and social meetings with strangers, I got you their email addresses, which I'll be forwarding to you soon.

As for avoiding alien invasions…well, this is London after all, so I'm afraid you won't have much luck on that side!

Sarah Jane

To: Blueboxgirl@smith.com
From: Lily@smith.com

Subject Header: Yet another update!

Hello Grandma!

School has finally started, and things have been quite hectic, which is why it took me so long to answer to your mail.

You'll be happy to hear that I visited 13 Bannerman Road! As always, Rani was very nice, and we looked through her collection of alien artefacts. This time, she showed me her drawer of mysterious crystals, and who knew there could be so many? It saddens me sometimes to think that I will never be able to know all there is to know about alien artefacts and life in the universe, but then also, it means I will never stop learning and seeing new marvels, and that's a wonderful thought isn't it?

Did you know that on the planet Nixos they have a crystal that lets you hear music when you hold it in your hands? And it's not just any kind of music, but a tune that perfectly harmonises with your deepest feelings and helps you to be in touch with your emotions, and therefore each person will hear a unique and personal song. Apparently, the inhabitants of that world can perceive multiple dimensions at the same time and can very easily lose track of their sense of self. So, at the start of every cycle of their planet, they hold a big ceremony, where everyone wears the crystals for a day and sings alongside the music. It is said to be a very beautiful event, with each different tune merging to-

gether across the dimensions to form one coherent whole.

Isn't that just fascinating? Rani told me she got this crystal from a wandering Nixan who visited Earth a few years ago. Apparently, there are a lot of alien tourists attracted by our little blue world, which does seem slightly weird to me, since after all they have the entirety of the universe to explore! Shining worlds and wonderful experiences! Why come here?

But then I suppose, what I see as a boring and bland world must seem full of wonders in the eyes of a visitor from outer space. It is all about context and point of views isn't it?

I even took some time to talk with Mr. Smith, he says hi to you too! He gave me a lot of information about various planets and races, but I'll go into more details in another mail. I don't want to infodump too much on you (especially as I bet you already know all of this, but after all, it is a bit complicated to talk about alien cultures with your average person).

I am quite sad I couldn't be there to see the UNIT gang again, it has been such a long time since I last saw them all! Thank Harry for me for the resources please, they have been a great addition to my growing files on alien cultures! It's always nice to have clear visual information too, because that's often the hardest to find. UNIT really did a good job with their cover-ups in the 70s/80s (such a good job we're not even sure of the correct decade!).

I also really appreciate the contacts you sent, but I haven't had the time to send them a quick mail. Besides, I do have exams soon so I have been focusing on my sketching for now. I should be fine, but after all, work comes first. I'll always have the time to go asking questions later!

I'll see you at Christmas! I hope there will be snow this year. I just long for the joy of running around in the cold again! And hopefully we might even see an appearance from a certain blue box… It has been a few years since he last visited after all.

Love,
Lily

To: Lily@smith.com
From: Blueboxgirl@smith.com

Subject Header: Christmas news

Oh, good to hear 13 Bannerman Road is as lively as ever! Jotting down information from Mr. Smith could really be useful for your files too, his bank of data is quite impressive.

Ask Rani if you can borrow some of the books still in the attic, I'm sure you'll find something to your liking there. I somehow ended up with quite a large collection of tourism books for the space-faring traveller thanks to the Doctor. Now, a guide on how to avoid being captured and nearly killed every time would have been more appreciated, but I'm sure you'll find them useful to learn about a variety of planets there. Or at least about the most interesting tourist attractions of various planets, which, well. It's something at least?

About Christmas…I just got a message from Lauren and Will, they probably won't make it this year either. I'm sorry, I know how much you wanted to see your parents again. Something about Will being held up with job matters in Peru? Lauren was really vague

about that. I guess it will just be us then! And Sky of course. She's currently very invested in her work but promised she would make time for us. Luke too, as always.

As for *him*… well, who knows? He's probably going to try being there, but as for him actually making it, that's another story altogether. He can never get it right, you know.

Your exam week ends right before the holidays, right? You'll tell me how it went when I see you, then! It will be nice to have some more company, it has been a bit lonely up here without you. I'm probably just getting old, I guess.

Well. Good luck on your exams, and I'm sure you'll ace them, Lily.

See you soon!
Sarah Jane

To: Blueboxgirl@smith.com
From: Lily@smith.com

Subject Header: January update

Hello Grandma!

I know it's been a little while since Christmas, but school has again become quite frantic and I must focus hard to stay afloat. Thank you once more for that wonderful and quiet party you organised! Even the snow was perfectly on time. I hope you did get some picture of the Byronic Doctor that popped up too, because, well, it's so hard to get a hold of him sometimes. Plus, he looked so happy playing in the snow with me! How I missed snow…

There doesn't seem to be a lot of it in London, which is really a shame. I always go back to childlike wonder when it's snowing, and it's the most wonderful feeling.

As for Mum and Dad, do they still send you all communications related to me? I still haven't got a single email or package from them. They probably forgot I moved to London…or they just don't think they can communicate directly with me, *as always*. Parents eh?

Anyway, unpleasantness aside, I did borrow a few books from Rani, as we discussed!

She even had a whole new shelf, full of books even you haven't read. So, I hope you don't mind if I go on a bit? There's some wonderful planets out there and I would just love to actually go there one day. Even if I don't think I would deal well with that change if I'm being honest. According to a guide, dating from 2615 (Do you realise that? That long in the future, it's mind boggling to think there are still printed books! I guess some things never change after all), there are so many marvels of the Universe now they stopped numbering them and can't even fit them all in one book! I would really love to see one of those guides from a non-human perspective however, as this one at least seems biased towards humanoid life. Getting some different point of views about the Universe and its wonders in the 27th century sound like a fascinating field of studies. I mean, I do like art but sometimes I would just love to go study some xeno-anthropology (I wonder if that's even the correct name? Who knows!) and the art forms of alien cultures.

For example, on the planet Gwenda, there are some gardens known as

the Drowning Gardens, which are named after the literal walls of water that rises from the ground, and which create a transparent maze throughout the gardens. It is said the specific attraction forces from both moons of Gwenda are the only reason the water is even able to float like that, and the gardens are influenced by the tides, changing every hour, little by little. Apparently, there's even mirrors and glass panels set up to create a dizzying lighting effect during the nights. Visiting the gardens and getting lost in them is one of the most popular things to do on the planet. And of course, they couldn't really be gardens without plants.

And that's the interesting thing! All the plants are actually set inside the walls of water (which is why the gardens are said to be drowning). And the thing is, those plants aren't even specifically aquatic plants, and yet they still thrive. Sadly, the guide doesn't specify exactly *why* it happens, instead just saying "Go and admire this miracle for yourself!" But I think it probably has something to do with the property of the water mixing in with the rays of the moons. Just imagine how beautiful this must look! I wonder what sort of impact on pop culture that kind of places had. Sketching there would be amazing!

I mean, if we had that kind of stuff on earth, I bet there would be lots and lots of art produced around it don't you think?

Love,
Lily

To: Lily@smith.com
From: Blueboxgirl@smith.com

Subject Header: Request

Lily, you know how I often get some unusual visitors? Well I need your help with one of them now. An escape pod crash-landed a few miles away from my village, and as it turns out there was a survivor. She told me she comes from Creex, and was on a vacation cruise when things went sour, and she had to leave the ship. Apparently her pod was defective and she was flown hundreds of miles off course. And now she needs help to get back home.

You know me, of course I tried helping her. However, I'm afraid I just don't have the resources needed here…

And Rani is currently out of the country, so I can't ask her to come and pick up Anya (that's the name of our crash lander!). Considering she looks like a bright blue humanoid with webbed hands, she can't just get the train to London.

Could you please do this for me and come pick her up in two weeks? I'm currently figuring something out with my neighbor, who has a truck and doesn't ask too many questions. He should be able to bring Anya halfway there, but I would need you to go get her and bring her to Bannerman Road and to Mr. Smith.

I know this a lot to ask, but Anya wouldn't let me call UNIT for help, as she is too afraid of the military, even though I told her she had nothing to fear from them…I will send you the exact details by mail, they should reach you in a few days. And please

make sure Mr. Smith can whip up something to transport her back.

Again, this might be a lot to ask but you are currently the only person available…

Also don't worry Lily, all that information about aliens cultures you are sharing with me is definitely not annoying, and I love reading about your enthusiasm for them.

And indeed, seeing the kind of art an entirely different culture can produce is one of the best experiences out there.

Sarah Jane

To: Blueboxgirl@smith.com
From: Lily@smith.com

Subject Header: ???????

Hello Grandma!

I'm sorry, you want me to do what??? Do you have the details on how I could actually get to a remote location a good hour away from London? And how exactly do you expect me to bring an actual *alien* back with me? Sure I love rambling about alien cultures, but this is an actual living person we are talking about here. You know I can't drive that well either! And…how exactly is Mr. Smith supposed to get her back home? And how am I supposed to keep her safe? I mean, London is a big city, it's not that easy to just bring an actual blue woman in the middle of Bannerman Road, you know?

Look Grandma, I love you, I really do, but are you sure this is a good idea? Can't you at least be more precise about what exactly you need me to do?? Because I did receive your letter with the "details" but frankly? You are just telling me where Anya will be so I can go pick her up, and you aren't giving me any information on *how* exactly I'm supposed to do that.

Love,
Lily

To: Lily@smith.com
From: Blueboxgirl@smith.com

Subject Header: Request Details

Oh Lily, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to upset you like that. I know undefined situations scare you, and I wouldn't ask this of you if I had another choice. But I really don't and Anya needs help.

Ok so…specific details right?

You already know where to pick Anya up, and I'm sorry I didn't think of adding a clearer step by step of what you need to do. I know you have a small car, and even though you aren't one for driving, could you please do this for me? It'd be an hour's drive to get there, and an hour to get back, preferably during the evening or at night, because, well, we don't want our friend to get noticed, right?

After that, I'd say drive straight to Bannerman Road, and get her to Mr. Smith. It should take you less than a day to deal with it all, and shouldn't be too much of a hassle, right? If you do it at night, no one should notice her. Aliens at night at Bannerman Road are common enough after all.

Then, Mr. Smith should be able to cook up an easy teleportation device to get her back home.

Really, just one more week and you won't have to worry about it. It is to help her out after all.

For me, please?

Sarah Jane

To: Blueboxgirl@smith.com
From: Lily@smith.com

Subject Header: Update on the situation

Hello Grandma!

Well. I met up with Anya, who is a very nice and understanding person thankfully. I got her safely to 13 Bannerman Road. We got lucky there, because the street itself was deserted, and I don't think anyone noticed us as we drove past.

We got to Mr. Smith alright, and that's when things started to go wrong. Because, see, it's not that easy to just teleport her. Her home is a bit too far for that to be possible with the equipment lying around in the attic, so Mr. Smith contacted a rescue ship that was in a nearby solar system. They should be here in around two weeks. *Two weeks*, Grandma! What am I supposed to do? I can't leave her all alone in Bannerman Road, but frankly I'm not sure how feasible it is to take her to my flat for two weeks. I mean, she said she was fine with either, and understands why she has to stay out of sight (She really is a nice person isn't she?) but I don't want to be a bad host, and dealing with someone at home for two weeks sounds…difficult.

I think we're just going to stay in Bannerman Road for the night, and I suppose I'll have to figure things out as soon as possible…

Are you sure Rani isn't back for another month? I could really use some help right now. I am slightly panicking right now, and actually scratch the slightly, I'm entirely panicking at this point!

Love,
Lily

To: Blueboxgirl@smith.com
From: Lily@smith.com

Subject Header: About that last mail

Hello Grandma!

Sorry about that last mail, I was freaking out a bit. I just wanted to send out a quick update now that I've had a day to think it over and to calm down. Anya was very nice about it too, and surprisingly understanding. I tried explaining to her about autism and how it affected me, and she explained to me that it's actually a very common thing amongst the universe. Did you know that? Apparently a lot of humanoid races have as much neurodivergence as humans! But it seems we're still one of those being the weirder about actually accepting it…

Isn't it wonderful? We so often represent aliens civilisation as one, uniform mass of people, all speaking the same languages, having the same names for their own people…and yet we forget that on our little Earth we are incredibly varied, both physically and mentally, and that's what makes us what we are, doesn't it? Anya was telling me about how on Creex (well, she specified on the Northern Sector of

Creex at least, she's not very familiar with how they do things in the Southern or Inner Sectors apparently) neurodiversity amongst the population was actually celebrated and recognised as a part of everyday life. And it seems like many other planets and people think the same out there. I know people always try to insult autistic people by saying we are "aliens" (like it's a slur, compared to what we humans are doing to each other?) but if the whole of humanity was only a tiny bit closer to some of the civilisations out there, maybe we wouldn't be in the mess we are in right now, now would we?

We really got talking after a while, and I explained to her that alien cultures have become one of my special interests growing up, so she just started reminiscing about her home and how life is on Creex. It's fascinating! As I mentioned above, there are Sectors on the planet, three of them (though there used to be four). They each represent a good chunk of the planet and its inhabitant, and until a few centuries ago were often at war with each other. But then one of the sectors developed a deadly weapon (Anya couldn't remember what kind of weapon, as she's no historian and mostly recalling the bigger events of their history from her history classes, so there may be some inaccuracy there. Can't just expect every inhabitant of a planet to know their whole history down to a T after all…).

It was such a deadly weapon that they ruined their own Sector during testing, and killed one fourth of the planet's population. Faced with this tragedy, the remaining three Sectors had to combine forces to help the survivors and stop the effect of the weapon. They ended up creating quite a few treaties forbidding weapons research, and weapons as a whole, to prevent the tragedy being repeated. After all, it could very well wipe their entire civilisation out.

And this is why, a good five centuries later, Creex is a thriving interplanetary center, with three very culturally distinct but allied Sectors, one near the north pole, one near the south pole, and one actually inside the planet's crust, as it offers a lot of caves and tunnels, and is partly hollow. And near the equator, there is a band of blackened soil that no living being can withstand. She tells me they call it the Dead Sector, and often take school kids there in secured tours to show them the danger of wars. It does sound a bit traumatising for young kids, but after all, knowing the mistakes of history and making sure not to repeat them is such an important thing, isn't it?

It really sounds like a very interesting planet!

Anyway, by the time she was done giving me a rundown of Creexian history, I had calmed down entirely and was able to think clearly again. I've decided on taking Anya to my flat until the rescue ship makes it here. Mr. Smith even connected to my phone, so he will be able to send me a message as soon as they are close enough for her to teleport away. For now, Anya agreed to disguise herself for the ride again, and to stay low for the next week or so. She's been through so much already, I do feel guilty for not being able to help her more…

Anyway, we are currently preparing to leave. Everything should be fine. And Anya has been a good friend

so far, so I'm lucky for that…

Don't worry about me, Grandma, I wrote that last email while I was having a bit of a breakdown but I'll be ok. I'll be ok.

Love,
Lily

To: Lily@smith.com
From: Blueboxgirl@smith.com

Subject Header: I'm sorry

Oh Lily. I'm sorry, I really didn't think things could go wrong like that. If my age allowed me I would go straight to London to take care of things, but I'm not supposed to overexert myself apparently…
doctor's orders! (And for once, this an order from a doctor I have to follow, which I know is pretty uncharacteristic for me.)

So…I guess this once I really have to leave it in your hands. I know I've been asking a lot of you with this, Lily, but I guess it's just that I trust you. You are a capable person, no matter what anyone else might think. No matter what you yourself might think.

And please, never stop sharing about the cultures that fascinate you, even after all these years there is so much yet for me to learn!

Take care of yourself, always, and please send me a message once Anya has made it safely back home. It's your first big alien adventure on Earth without me after all, but you are right.

You'll be fine, Lily. You are my granddaughter after all.

Love you, always.
Sarah Jane

To: Blueboxgirl@smith.com
From: Lily@smith.com

Subject Header: Some closure

Hello Grandma!

I'm sorry I worried you, and thank you so much for such a kind mail. This is why you are my favorite Grandma!

Cohabiting with Anya was actually pretty nice? You know how I am with changes and noises, so I was quite worried about that, but we got along very well, and she really respected my space and need for quiet. It was two long weeks, especially as she couldn't go out much, and I had to buy twice as many groceries (while still keeping up with school work! Being a student and helping aliens at the same time is such hard work…).

Good thing my neighbors aren't really nosy, however, so we managed to remain unnoticed.

After two weeks, I got a message from Mr. Smith telling us to come over the next day, as the ship was finally in orbit. I'll be honest, I was glad to be getting my life back to normal but also…I'll miss Anya. We got to be good friends in the end, which I guess I didn't really expect, but I am glad for.

Thankfully we exchanged contact info, and Mr. Smith slightly edited my phone so we'd be able to stay in touch even when she'll be in another galaxy!

So yes. A tiring but very interesting experience. And I found a friend thanks to it.

So…I guess thank you for trusting me? It means a lot to me, Grandma. And while it was a really stressful time, I am kinda hoping for more ad-

ventures, with or without aliens. I just hope I'd control it a bit more next time? Earth can be a pretty interesting place too, so even if there's no aliens around I'll figure out my own way to be as amazing as you and make you proud. Just you wait!

Love,
Lily

Contributors

M.H. Norris launched her mystery series, *All the Petty Myths*, which combines forensics and mythology, in 2017. The first volume featured the premiere story "Midnight," which won #2 Best Mystery Novel in the 2018 Preditors and Editors Readers' Poll. Other stories in the collection took home #1 Science-Fiction/Fantasy Short Story and #1 Steampunk Short Story.

She is also known as the mystery maven and sci-fi sorceress. Her first novel, *Badge City: Notches*, earned her the 2016 Pulp Ark New Pulp Award for Best Novella. *The Whole Art of Detection*, took #4 Best Mystery in The 2016 Preditors and Editors Readers' Poll.

Her short fiction has appeared in *The Lemon Herberts, Saucy Robot Stories Glass Coin, Speakeasies and Spiritualists*, and *Silver Screen Sleuths*. Her essay on K-9 was featured in the *Doctor Who* charity anthology *Children of Time: The Companions of Doctor Who* and she has written numerous articles for *The Time Travel Nexus.* She is co-host and co-producer on *The Raconteur Roundtable,* a popular podcast focused on in-depth, intimate interviews with authors, actors, and other creators.

By day, **Kara Dennison** is a journalist for genre publications including Crunchyroll, Viewster, and The Sartorial Geek by Jordandené. By night (and in general) her work can be read in the *City of the Saved* and *Iris Wildthyme* lines from Obverse Books, the *Seasons of War* charity anthology series, and the *You and Who* series. With artist Ginger Hoesly, she is the co-creator of the *Owl's Flower* light novel series.

In 2018, Kara penned the *Black Archive*'s *Heaven Sent* installment, and conducted Peter Capaldi's first public interview since leaving *Doctor Who*.

Kara works from a converted NASA lab she shares with four guinea pigs and ludicrous amounts of tea.

Jon Black is your basic "absinthe and BBQ" guy from Austin. He discovered the Doctor on KERA, the Dallas Public Television station, in the late 80s; something which, at the time, branded him as a nerd even among nerds. His favorite Doctor was (and remains) John Pertwee, especially those episodes with Sarah Jane Smith. So "Swinging Londons" is much more than a story for him, it is a labor of love. It

also proves that, even when writing sci-fi, he is incapable of breaking his historical fiction addiction. Jon is the author of the award-winning novel *Bel Nemeton*, the first book in his series combining 6th century Arthurian historical fantasy with 21st century progressive pulp as well as the Jazz Age supernatural mystery "Gabriel's Trumpet" and the tongue-in-cheek Sherlock Holmes homage "A Scandal in Hollywood."

His other work includes writing for roleplaying games and music history/ music journalism. Look for him at JonBlackWriters.com, facebook.com/-JonBlackAuthor, and, when he remembers, on Twitter at @BlackOnBlues.

Niki Haringsma fell in love with *Doctor Who* in 2012 and never stopped falling. Recently, he wrote the *Black Archive* volume *Doctor Who: Love & Monsters* for Obverse Books, as well as the short story "What Keeps Their Lines Alive" in *Faction Paradox: The Book of the Peace*. She also co-edited the charity anthology *Unbound: Adventures in Time and Space* and contributed two of its stories, "To Be Born" (a comic based on *Blood Heat: Director's Cut*) and "Were You The Coward" (a sequel to the audio play *Exile*). For the charity book *Children of Time*, Niki contributed essays about the Doctor Who Magazine companions Izzy Sinclair and Destriianatos. You can read more about Niki's writing and art at www.nikiharingsma.wordpress.com and find her on twitter and Instagram as @nikisketches.

James Macaronas is a writer and performer who started watching *Doctor Who* in 2003 and never stopped. He was editor of the University of Melbourne's *Farrago* in 2017, has written two plays (and is working on a third), and blogs at changingvoid.wordpress.com. When he's not writing, he's probably pretending to be a robot.

James Bojaciuk is CEO Duobus of 18thWall Productions. He's also the co-host and producer of *The Raconteur Roundtable*, a podcast dedicated to intimate, in-depth interviews with creators. If that weren't enough, he's written a *Faction Paradox* story which won #4 Best Science Fiction/Fantasy Short Story (in *Stranger Tales of the City*), a Sherlock Holmes story which won Best Steampunk Short Story (Preditors and Editors Readers' Poll 2017), and co-edited two volumes of *Cryptid Clash!* with Josh Reynolds. Other recent fiction and articles have appeared in *Speakeasies & Spiritualists*, *Occult Detective Quarterly*, and Doctor Who Appreciation Society publications.

Anna Maloney is a writer. She is a regular contributor to *Cosmic Toyroom* and other Doctor Who Appreciation Society publications, and her other *Doctor Who*-related writing can be found in *Mild Curiosities* (Sophie Iles Art) & *Children of Time: The Companions of Doctor Who* (kOZMIC). Her first novel, *Every Little Thing*, won #7 Best Romance Novel in the 2018 Preditor and Editor Readers' Poll.

Joshua Wanisko, like every author whose bio you've ever read, lives with a bunch of cats, one of whom is stepping on the keyboard as he's trying to write this very statement. He's best known for writing *Forever Fallen*, the winning story in the first Paul Spragg Memorial Short Trip Opportunity, as well as telling outrageous lies as a way to avoid talking about himself. Also, he was the Doctor in a parallel universe but was exiled to ours by vengeful Time Lords for the crime of contributing to charity anthologies. He writes stories as a way of remembering his home dimension and hopes someday to return. Two of the accomplishments of which he's most proud are represented in this collection.

Lillian Wanisko was the inspiration for the character of Odessa in *Forever Fallen* and in fact came up with the name of the cafe, The Uncertain-tea Principle. She is an honor roll student and hopes to rule Earth, rule Mars, and make Pluto a planet again so she can rule it. Her hobbies include being perfect, and only having two hobbies.

Tina Marie DeLucia is putting their creating writing degree to good use with continued forays into the world of anthology. Last seen in *Children of Time* and the 2019 *Celestial Toyroom Annual*, Tina continues to spread their love of *Doctor Who* and all things science fiction both in print and online by writing for *The Time Travel Nexus* as a staff writer and striving to be a self-righteous artist.

Scarlett Ward is a writer and actor living in London with a cat called Romana. They have short stories in various upcoming anthologies from 18thWall Productions and Circlet Press. Acting-wise they've performed in theatres such as the Royal Court, the Queen's Theatre, and in various short films, charity ads, and audio plays, and they're mostly known for still being able to play twelve year olds.

William J. Martin is a young writer from Liverpool. His work has appeared in 18thWall Productions' award-winning, awfully alliterative anthologies, *Speakeasies & Spiritualists*, and *Silver Screen Sleuths*. He is also a contributor in the Doctor Who Appreciation Society's *2019 Annual*, and Sophie Iles Art's *Mild Curiosities*. Less impressive accomplishments include his large collection of *Doctor Who* DVDs, and being too tall.

An aspiring science fiction writer, **Harry King** first came across Sarah Jane Smith through his *Doctor Who* encyclopedias. After reading about her there, he was excited when she appeared in the episode "School Reunion" and later in *The Sarah Jane Adventures*. This is his first published story, and he hopes to write more in the near future.

Sophie Iles is an artist, writer, and once-upon-a-time animator. She often works with 18thWall Productions, serving as a rotating host on *The Raconteur Roundtable*, and providing her art and designs.

Soph's published writing includes a short story about Rigsy which appeared in kOZMIC Press' *Children of Time: The Companions of Doctor Who*, and recently published her first original short story, "A Single Wolf, Grey and Gaunt" within an anthology *Sockhops and Seances*. She has also written articles on Doctor Who for 18thWall Productions and *The Time Travel Nexus*.

Soph's art has found internet acclaim appearing *in Doctor Who Magazine*, BBC's Anglophena's *Doctor Who Round Up*, both Doctor Who Appreciation Society's fanzines: *Cosmic Masque* and *Celestial Toyroom*, *The Time Travel Nexus*, and has curated her own charity fanzine *Mild Curiosities* in memory of Jacqueline Hill about Ian Chesterton and Barbara Wright with all the proceeds going to Breast Cancer Now.

Anne-Laure Tuduri is a young French art student who spends way too much time exploring all things *Doctor Who*. She also wrote for a few charity anthologies, such as *Unbound: An Adventure in Time and Space*. She hopes to continue writing and drawing for *Doctor Who* related projects in the future. You can find her online at artstation.com/liria10.